

MERVYN CLITHEROE.

COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS.
VOL. CCCCXXXIX.

MERVYN CLITHEROE BY W. HARRISON AINSWORTH.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LODGE

BERNHARDT TADDER

1858.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MERVYN CLITHEROE.

BY

W. HARRISON AINSWORTH.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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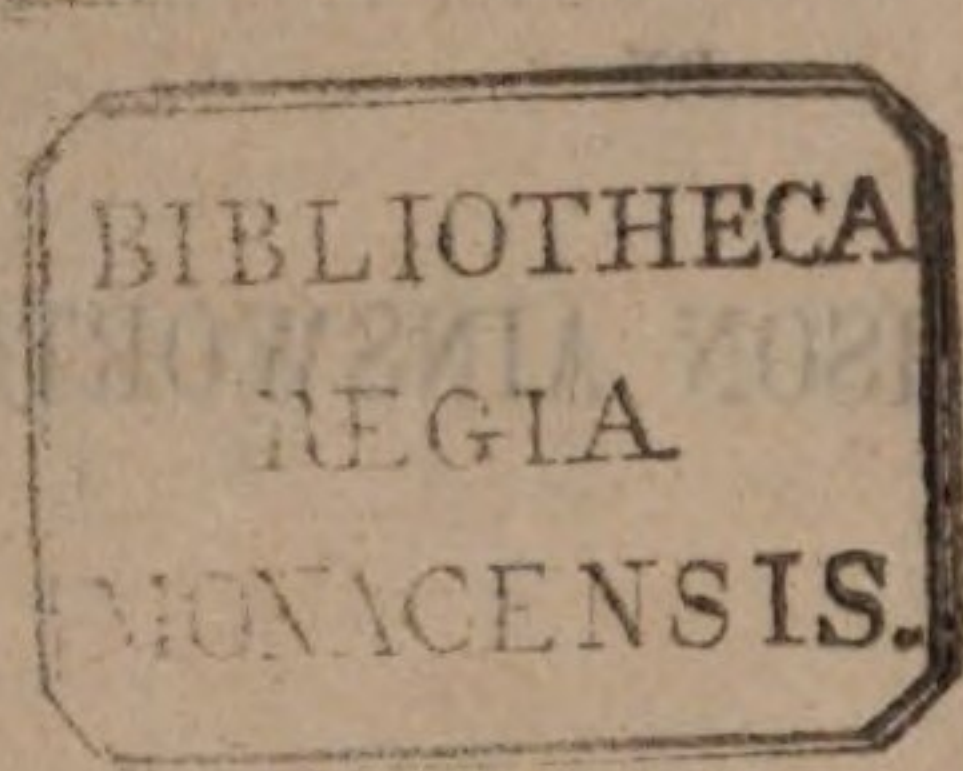
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CONTENTS

OF VOLUME II.

BOOK THE SECOND.

	Page
CHAPTER XI.	
I obtain an insight into John Brideoake's heart	1
CHAPTER XII.	
The Legend of Owlarton Grange — My Adventure in the Haunted Chamber	20
CHAPTER XIII.	
Wherein Old Hazy endeavours to persuade me that I have been deluded by an Evil Spirit	34
CHAPTER XIV.	
Love in a Maze	42
CHAPTER XV.	
What happened in the orchard of the Mill in Weverham Glen	50

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER I.	
How the two Wizards of Owlarton Grange raised a spirit which they did not expect	73
CHAPTER II.	
Miss Hazilrigge takes me into her confidence	83
CHAPTER III.	
Revelations	91
CHAPTER IV.	
I give a rustic Fête at the Mill	106

	Page
CHAPTER V.	
In which I appear in a new character	139
CHAPTER VI.	
Showing what success attended the stratagem	146
CHAPTER VII.	
I am worsted, and driven ingloriously from the field	154
CHAPTER VIII.	
Mr. Comberbach has gloomy forebodings	158
CHAPTER IX.	
In which John Brideoake is made acquainted with his family history by Doctor Foam	162
CHAPTER X.	
John and I revisit our old school, and pass a few hours in the Chetham Library — Ill Tidings	171
CHAPTER XI.	
Delamere Forest	175
CHAPTER XII.	
The Turf-Cutter's Hut	185
CHAPTER XIII.	
The Chase across the Morass	195
CHAPTER XIV.	
The Search for the Body	199
CHAPTER XV.	
The Examination before the Magistrates	209
CHAPTER XVI.	
The Thaumaturgus again appears on the scene	226
CHAPTER XVII.	
Fortune at last favours me	237
CHAPTER XVIII.	
The Steeple-Chase	249
CHAPTER XIX.	
Once more at the Grave	264
CHAPTER XX.	
At Home at the Anchorite's	268

LIFE AND ADVENTURES
OF
MERVYN CLITHEROE.

VOL. II.

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER XI.

I obtain an insight into John Brideoake's heart.

I FOUND John Brideoake's little domicile without difficulty, having carefully noted its position in passing through Weverham on the previous day.

A pretty ornamental cottage; small, but commodious enough for its occupant, with a thatched roof, a rustic porch overgrown with honey-suckles and other creepers, and white-washed walls covered with a profusion of roses. In front, a trimly-kept garden with dainty flower-beds, and a grass-plot planted with standard roses. John must have become excessively fond of roses, for he had them in every variety, and the plants appeared to be well tended. There was a cheerful look about the little habitation that delighted me, and I lingered in the garden, admiring its beauty and arrangement, before I advanced to the porch.

Suddenly I heard my name pronounced by a well-known voice, and John himself, issuing from an arbour where he had

been reading, hastened towards me, and with an exclamation of delight flung his arms round my neck.

My poor friend! he was sadly changed, and my heart sank within me as I gazed at him.

If he could have stood erect, John would have been above the average height, but his slender frame was prematurely bent, and his movements betokened extreme debility. He was so thin, that his clothes hung loosely about him; and his looks altogether were calculated to inspire the most serious apprehensions. But in spite of their emaciation his features were handsome — I might almost say beautiful; and his eyes were large and lustrous — too lustrous, indeed, when viewed in connexion with his pallid cheeks with the ominous red spot upon them.

While regarding him wistfully I could scarcely repress my emotion, and I found it wholly impossible to give utterance to the expression of joy which a meeting with him must otherwise have prompted. My poor friend had no such misgivings in regard to me, but seemed unfeignedly delighted to see me, and the affectionate warmth of his greeting, while it endeared him still more to me, increased, if possible, my anxiety for him.

Still keeping his arm over my shoulder, he led me into his cottage, and opening the door of a little room, which he called his study, ushered me into it.

A pleasant room, looking upon the garden, embowered with roses, and furnished with book-shelves laden with the works of divines and writers on ecclesiastical history, amongst which I distinguished South, Strype, Stillingfleet, Tillotson, and Sherlock. On the table lay a large annotated Bible, with book-marks placed in it, writing materials, and a half-finished manuscript sermon. I told John, as I took a chair, that he

had a delightful abode, and I thought he must now lead a truly happy life.

"As happy a life as I can ever expect to lead, dear Mervyn," he replied. "My desires are few, and my great object is to do all the good I can. I am of some little use to my parishioners, and if more strength were granted me I might do yet more for them. As it is, I persuade myself that I have gained their love, and they listen to my counsels. I have healed some differences — have brought several erring sheep back to the fold — and I would fain believe that I have been the humble instrument of rescuing one soul at least from perdition."

"That you discharge the duties of your sacred calling to the fullest extent of your power, I cannot for a moment doubt, dear John," I replied, "and fortunate it is for those amongst whom you are thrown that they have such a pastor and friend. But you must take care of yourself, and not tax your energies too far. The country about you is very beautiful — indeed I hardly know a more picturesque district — but are you quite sure that the place is healthy? — does it agree with you?"

"If I suffer, dear Mervyn," he replied, "it is not from any ill effects caused by the air of the place, but by latent disease, which I have reason to fear is consuming me. I am quite as well here as I should be elsewhere — perhaps better. Indeed, I should not be so well elsewhere, for then I should be anxious about my little flock. No, Mervyn, the end with me cannot be far off, and I trust to be permitted to breathe my last amongst those whom my precepts and example may benefit. I shall not be able to accomplish half the work I would fain perform, but while power is granted me I will never abandon it."

Recalling the singular conversation we had had about my friend during breakfast that morning, I said,

"But were circumstances suddenly to change your position, John, would you still desire to stay here?"

"There is little likelihood of my position being changed," he replied; "but thus much I will say, that even under altered circumstances, if any choice were left me, I would remain here. As I have told you, I am strongly attached to my flock, and it would pain me to separate from them."

"I understand and respect the feeling," I replied. "You have found a home here amongst strangers which you could not meet with amidst your own family."

"It is quite true, Mervyn," he said, sadly. "My mother, as you are aware, has cast me from her, and without any just cause, as I verily believe, on my part, treats me as if I had deeply offended her. I have disappointed her — though that can scarcely be imputed to me as a fault, since my strength failed me in the task — but I myself am more deeply disappointed than she can ever be. It is a deplorable thing, to imagine a mother without love for her children; but on reviewing my life calmly, I am forced to come to the conclusion that she never loved — in the full sense of maternal love — either myself or Apphia."

"A saddening reflection indeed, John," I replied; "but as you have said so much, I will not hesitate to go further, and declare my conviction that your mother will not scruple to sacrifice the happiness of her children in order to carry out her own designs. She is about to force Apphia into a match which must be productive of wretchedness to her. The marriage must be averted, if possible. Ill will come of it. You know that I would never malign even an enemy, and will believe me when I assert that Malpas Sale is in all respects unworthy to be your sister's husband."

"You are incapable, I am sure, of asserting anything you do not fully believe, Mervyn; but in this instance you are influenced by feelings that may warp your judgment. You have long entertained a dislike to Malpas, and latterly your dislike has deepened into animosity. You can, therefore, scarcely be accounted a fair judge."

"Perhaps not, John; but I advance nothing that I am not prepared to prove. I did not dislike Malpas formerly without cause — neither is it without good cause that I hate him now. I have been wronged — deeply wronged — and must have reparation."

"But not in the way you propose, Mervyn," he replied, with gentle gravity. "I grieve to hear you profess sentiments so totally at variance with those which Christianity inculcates, and by which alone your conduct ought to be governed. Forgiveness may be hard to practise, but, trust me, it is the only way to efface the sense of injury. I speak to you, Mervyn, because I love you as a brother, and loving you thus dearly, I cannot be blind to your faults. You have many excellent — nay, admirable qualities — you are generous, enthusiastic, warm-hearted, loyal — but you are also impetuous, quick in anger, disposed to be resentful. It is the latter tendency, more than any other, that I desire to see corrected; because it wars most with your present happiness, and may endanger your future weal. I do not say that you are unforgiving — far from it — such conduct would be incompatible with the generosity of your nature. But your wrath, easily kindled, does not soon die out, and you believe yourself bound by laws of honour to obtain satisfaction for wrongs, sometimes imaginary, but even if real, not to be thus repaired. Leave vengeance in His hands, who alone is able to repay."

Gentle and kindly-intended as was John's reproof, it

somewhat chafed me, and I answered, I fear, rather impatiently,

"I am quite sure you are right, John, but I should play the hypocrite were I to admit that I shall act as you would have me act. Believing Malpas Sale to be a villain, I do not mean to rest till I have unmasked and punished him."

"Malpas may be as you represent him, though I hope not. But grant that he is so, do not you, Mervyn, commit a fault as grave as any you reprobate. Leave others to decide the question. You cannot act both as accuser and judge."

"Act as judge yourself, then, John, and decide between us. Has Malpas not robbed me of my fortune? Has he not snatched from me your sister, whom I loved better than life? These are the wrongs that goad me to call down punishment upon his head. You, John — pure and virtuous yourself — can scarcely believe in the misdeeds of others. In addition to the injuries he has done me, enough to warrant the most terrible reprisals on my part, Malpas has carried desolation into a once happy family — has destroyed the happiness of a fond husband — taken away from him his wife —"

"Hold! Mervyn," John interrupted. "This last charge, at all events, falls to the ground. I am aware of the unhappy case to which you refer, and I am persuaded that Malpas was not the author of the wrong then committed."

"You believe, then, that Simon Pownall was the destroyer of Ned Culcheth's peace?" I cried.

"I do," he answered. "I have means of knowing the truth of this lamentable case, and I believe it to be as I have stated."

"You are imposed upon, John," I said.

"Alas! not so," he replied, sadly but firmly. "It is

you, Mervyn, who are blinded by prejudice. May you, one day, see the truth clearly — and not, as now, through a glass darkly!”

He spoke with so much earnestness and conviction that I was staggered; but a moment's reflection brought me back to my original opinion.

“Poor Sissy's avowal alone shall satisfy me,” I cried.

“If that will suffice, perhaps it may be obtained,” he returned.

“How?” I exclaimed, startled. “Do you know where she is?”

“I am not at liberty to answer any questions on the subject,” he said. “There is only one person to whom I can reveal anything that has been divulged to me. To Sissy's unhappy husband I may possibly speak — but to no other.”

“Then do speak to him, John, I adjure you; and perhaps, through your intervention, something of peace may be restored to his breast. At all events, he may be brought to a better frame of mind.”

“Send him to me, and I will do all that in me lies to help him,” the young curate said, fervently. “But do not raise your hopes too highly,” he continued, with an expression of great sadness. “Poor Ned has had a severe trial; but the worst is not yet over. Question me no further, I pray of you. Let us change this painful theme.”

“So be it,” I replied, reluctantly. “Let us return to a matter in which I myself am personally interested. Will you not oppose your sister's marriage with Malpas?”

“I do not conceive that I should be warranted in opposing it — neither do I think any opposition on my part would be availing. I have already remonstrated with my mother, and have angered her so much against me by doing so, that she will neither write to me herself, nor suffer Apphia to write to

me. I am unwilling to widen the breach. My mother, with all her faults of temper, is still my mother, and I owe her a son's obedience."

"But, by the same rule, your sister is your sister, and as a brother you are bound to save her from certain misery."

"If I saw the matter with your eyes, I might act differently, Mervyn. But Apphia seems reconciled to the match. You know my weaknesses, and I could not, therefore, disguise them from you, even if so disposed. Naturally timid, in my mother's presence I lose all my self-possession, and I could no more dispute with her than I could wrestle with an athlete. She has always been accustomed to exact obedience from me and Apphia, and neither of us have ever disputed her control."

"I know it, John — but if your sister's happiness depended upon your resolution, would you not throw off this unfortunate weakness? — for such, in truth, I esteem it."

"I must first feel that the effort is needed. It might be fatal to me. I am equal to little now."

"Forgive me, John, if I put a question to you, which has its origin in no idle curiosity, but in sincere interest in yourself. Your mother's proud deportment has excited surprise, and I have been asked what there is to justify her haughtiness — in a word, whether she belongs to some family of good lineage. I could offer no information, for I have none to give."

"Neither can I afford you any information, Mervyn, being in utter ignorance as to my mother's family. Such a statement might appear incredible to any one except yourself, who know my mother, and are aware of the extraordinary reserve of her character. What may be her motives for casting an impenetrable veil over her family history I pretend not to divine. But she has done so from my earliest years, and could never

be induced for a moment to withdraw it. All I know relative to my father is that he died before my mother gave birth to Apphia, and that the marriage, either on one side or the other — but probably my mother's — had offended her connexions so deeply, that they disowned her altogether, and she was consequently plunged into the greatest distress. At that period we all suffered much, and my proud mother most of all. She forbade us then ever to speak of her relations — ever to inquire after them — and I religiously obeyed her. Apphia, indeed, has questioned her repeatedly in my hearing, but has always been sharply checked for her curiosity. So little do I know about myself, Mervyn, that I am by no means sure that the name I bear is my rightful name. Enough! — it will serve to be inscribed upon my tombstone."

Profound emotion kept me silent for a short space. At last I said,

"But if you are indifferent to your parentage, John, I am not. Have you any objection to my instituting inquiries for you?"

"I would rather you did not. I should gain nothing by learning a secret which my mother has sedulously kept from me. What boots it, Mervyn, who I am? I am alone in the world — or nearly alone. Heaven knows that I seek to honour and love my mother, and strive to obey her! Heaven knows, also, that I dearly love my sister, though I am not permitted to behold her, or to profit by her love! I have no kinsman; and except yourself, my friend and brother, I have none to care for me — none to sympathise with me, or to share my sorrows."

He bowed his head, and we were again silent.

"Yet do not think that I repine," he continued, more cheerfully. "While I can be useful in my limited sphere, I ought to be content."

"Long as I have known you, John," I exclaimed, regarding him with admiration, "I never fully understood you till now."

"You overrate me, my dear friend," he replied, kindly. "Suffering has made me a better man. By constantly fixing my thoughts on Heaven, I have been able to shake off the ties of earth. Yet when I had emancipated myself from thralldom, and conquered, as I deemed, all my worldly feelings and passions, I was again for awhile enslaved."

I thought this a fitting opportunity for putting a question I had meditated; and I inquired if his heart had ever been touched?

He would not hide the truth from me, but answered, though with some bashfulness,

"Yes, I was foolish enough to indulge for a time a hopeless passion. Before becoming aware of it, I had swallowed the intoxicating potion, and, under its influence, I lost my customary self-control. I loved madly — yes, madly is the word — for what but madness could it be in me to aspire even in thought to a young and lovely heiress?"

"Did you ever declare your passion, John?" I said, regarding him earnestly.

"Never in words," he replied, an almost maidenly blush suffusing his pale cheek. "I should not have dared to give utterance to my feelings."

"Speak to me without reserve, John, for you know you are speaking to a brother. Did she — did the object of your regard seem to encourage your suit? Tell me the exact impression produced upon you by her manner?"

"My impression, then, is, Mervyn, that she perceived she had made my heart captive, and merely encouraged me for her amusement. When she found she had gone too far, she made me clearly understand that she was indifferent to

me. Alas! it was then too late for me. The arrow was shot which will rankle in my breast so long as sensibility lasts within it."

"My poor friend!" I exclaimed, with deep sympathy.

"But you may find some other person to whom you can transfer your love."

"Love like mine, Mervyn, cannot be transferred," he replied, mournfully. "My heart is not susceptible of a second impression."

"You have not confided to me the name of the syren who has bewitched you, John, but I guessed it from the first. And I admit that her beauty is quite sufficient to account for the influence she has gained over you — nay more, I will own to you, my dear friend, that I was well-nigh falling into the same snare myself."

"You!" he exclaimed, quickly, and putting his hand to his heart as if to repress a pang, while a hot flush sprang to his cheek. Then suddenly recovering himself, he added, "Forgive me, Mervyn, for the selfish feeling which crossed me for a moment. Why should you not love Ora Doveton? Why should my senseless passion, which ought never to have been indulged, prevent you from winning her regard — from claiming her hand? Let no thought of me stand between you and her. If you love her, it will be my fondest aspiration that you may win her. I had, indeed, hoped that another union might have brought us more closely together — might have made us really brothers, as we are in regard — but that hope is crushed. Whether Ora is as well calculated to make you happy as Apphia, cannot now be considered. You have lost the one, may you gain the other!"

"I fully appreciate the unheard-of generosity of your motives, John," I said. "But I have no reason to believe that Ora has thought seriously about me for a moment. Nay,

now that I am better acquainted with her character than I was at first, I cannot help suspecting that she has been trifling with me in the same heartless manner that she trifled with you. But I am still able to stop."

"But why should you stop?" John cried. "Not from consideration to me — for I am out of the question. Besides, it would be idle to institute any comparison between us. Though merely coquetting with me, Ora could scarcely be otherwise than sincere with you, formed as you are to please. No — no — our cases are widely different. Success awaits you, though failure has attended me."

I regarded him in astonishment, scarcely able to credit such self-abnegation, even in him.

"I should not be the true friend I am to you, John," I said, "if I were to yield to your generous solicitations. Not till I am assured that Ora has no regard for you, will I indulge another thought of her."

"Take the assurance from me," he said. "I am not likely to be deceived on such a point."

"I do not know that," I replied. "Your diffidence makes you despair where a bolder man might justly feel confident. Again, I say, I must ascertain from her own lips that Ora has dismissed all thoughts of you before I advance another step."

"You must do no such thing, Mervyn," John said, earnestly. "Promise me that you will never mention what has passed between us to Ora. I am ashamed of my folly and presumption. Do not expose me to ridicule. I have laid bare my heart to you as a brother. Respect its secrets."

"Calm yourself, dear John," I said. "Your wishes shall be obeyed. What is more, I believe you are right. Neither of us ought to think of Ora. What I have just learnt explains your absence yesterday. You shun a meeting with her."

"Till I am completely cured, I judge it safest not to meet her," he returned. "But in truth I did not feel equal to dining out yesterday — so the excuse was justifiable."

As we were talking, I perceived an old man, with a leathern bag slung across his shoulders, enter the garden, and march towards the cottage door.

"Whom have we here, John?" I asked.

"The postman," he replied. "His visits are rare here. I receive few letters. You have been my best correspondent."

Shortly afterwards a pretty little rustic-looking girl, about ten years of age, entered the room with a letter on a tray, and handing the missive to John, and dropping a curtsey to me, she retired.

"Apphia's handwriting!" John exclaimed, in surprise, after glancing at the superscription of the letter. "What can it mean? The poor girl must have written to me without our mother's knowledge?" He then paused, and his countenance lost the glad smile which had for a moment illumined it. "A presentiment crosses me that this is a messenger of ill tidings. Have you never felt, Mervyn, ere opening a letter, that you had a notion of its contents — and could tell whether it brought weal or wo?"

"I have experienced something of the sort, I confess. But I trust your present forebodings may not be verified."

"We will ascertain at once," he replied.

"Hold, John," I cried, rising. "I will quit you for a short time, in order that you may read your letter tranquilly. Apphia may write to you about many circumstances which might render my presence undesirable."

"I thank you for your consideration, dear Mervyn," he replied. "It may possibly be as you suggest. I will call you when I have read the letter."

Taking my hat, I stepped forth into the garden. After lingering near the flower-beds for a few minutes, finding that John did not summon me, I walked out into the highroad, which a little further on was completely overshadowed by large trees, forming a natural avenue to the church — a structure of great beauty and antiquity, distant about three hundred yards. Between the church and my friend's dwelling several cottages intervened, and amongst others a small public-house. At the door of the latter stood a tall man, evidently making inquiries, and as he turned towards me I recognised Ned Culcheth. Indeed, I should have known Ned at once if I had seen Hubert, who now sprang over a hedge, and came bounding towards me.

On descrying me, the keeper hurried forward, and we soon met. He told me he had been to Owlarton Grange, and learning there that I had gone over to Weverham, he had followed me, and had just been inquiring at the public-house for Mr. Brideoake's dwelling. Ned added that he was sure he was now on Simon Pownall's track, and felt confident, ere long, of discovering the rascal's retreat. It would surprise me, he said, to learn that Simon must be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Weverham. He had picked up this piece of information by playing the spy upon Chetham Quick, and had managed to overhear a private conference between Chetham and the young gipsy, Obed; — the end of which was that Obed was engaged to convey a letter secretly to Pownall. The pair had not spoken of Pownall by his right name, but Ned was certain that their discourse referred to him.

Obed started on his mission before daybreak that morning, and Ned, who had never lost sight of him, followed him as closely as he judged prudent, making sure that the gipsy would guide him to Pownall's retreat. But the wary vagabond

must have found out who was upon his heels, for on entering Weverham Glen he entirely disappeared, and after a couple of hours' fruitless search, aided by Hubert, whom he had put upon Obed's scent, Ned was obliged to quit the ravine. The young gipsy, no doubt, had waded for some distance in the brook to destroy the scent, for it was lost on the banks. What became of him afterwards Ned could not discover.

Ned's scheme having thus failed, he had naturally gone on to Owlarton Grange to consult me. His relation was curious, and might have interested me more, if I had not been chiefly struck by the singular opportuneness of the poor fellow's arrival.

After debating with myself whether I should tell him what John Brideoake had intimated to me about Sissy, I arrived at the conclusion that any disclosure respecting her would come best from the young clergyman himself, and I therefore said,

"Well, at all events, whether you find Pownall or not, Ned, you have not come hither on a bootless errand. Mr. Brideoake can give you some intelligence of your wife. What it is, I know not, for he declined to communicate any particulars to me — saying they were for your ear alone; but I must prepare you for bad tidings, for such, I fear, they will prove."

"I have not lost her?" Ned said, halting and looking hard at me. "You don't mean to prepare me for that?"

"No — no," I replied; "your apprehensions of calamity far outstrip my meaning. I only judge, from Mr. Brideoake's manner, that he has something distressing to relate, and I deem it right to prepare you for it."

"Nothing more distressing can be in store for me than what has already occurred," Ned replied, marching by my side as I proceeded towards the cottage.

Before introducing the poor keeper, I thought it best to acquaint John with his unexpected arrival, and, leaving Ned and his hound in the garden, I entered the cottage alone.

I found my friend in a state of utter prostration, evidently occasioned by the perusal of his sister's letter.

"I am not the only sufferer in my family, Mervyn," he said. "Apphia appears to be equally unhappy. The view I took of her position, which I explained to you just now, is entirely changed by the details she gives me in this letter, which, as I supposed, is written without my mother's knowledge. I now agree with you that her marriage with Malpas ought never to take place. And yet to thwart my mother! — to disobey her — to incur her lasting displeasure — perhaps her malediction — it is frightful to think of it."

And his countenance proclaimed the terror and agitation to which his thoughts gave birth.

"Does Apphia urge you to interfere, John?" I cried. "I ask only that."

"She does, and of course I cannot refuse the appeal. But, as I have already told you, the effort will cost me my life."

"Courage! John, courage!" I exclaimed. "Rouse yourself and be a man. You shall have all the support I can give you. Though the difficulties of the task may appear insurmountable at first, they will dwindle into nothing if met firmly. But we will talk of this anon. I have another matter to bring before you now. There is a person at hand whose claims upon your attention are urgent, and ought not to be deferred."

And I then acquainted him with the unexpected arrival of Ned Culcheth, and entreated him to admit him.

"Assuredly I will see him," he replied, "though I would

willingly have chosen another occasion — when my nerves might be more firmly strung — for an interview with the poor fellow. Where is he — in the garden? — bid him come to me, and I will speak to him at once. And I must beg you, dear Mervyn, to let me have some quarter of an hour's discourse with him in private. I will do my best to console him under his heavy affliction."

On this I stepped forth, and calling to Ned Culcheth, bade him go in. He at once obeyed, uncovering his glowing locks, and bowing his tall head as he crossed the little threshold. I kept Hubert with me, and taking the hound into the arbour, sat down to meditate.

Many minutes had not elapsed when a startling noise was heard at the door of the cottage, as of some one rushing hurriedly forth, and Hubert, who was couched near me, sprang up, and dashed out of the arbour.

I followed, and was just in time to stop poor Ned, who was making his way wildly across the little parterres and grass-plot, regardless of the shrubs and flowers that he trampled beneath his feet.

His looks were fearfully haggard, and his demeanour desperate. Nevertheless, I ran up to him, and laying hold of his arm, arrested him forcibly.

"What are you about, Ned?" I cried.

"I am about to put an end to a wretched existence," he rejoined, in a voice scarcely human. "Stand off! and let me go."

"Never, for the fell purpose you are bent on, Ned," I exclaimed, still keeping fast hold of him. "What's the matter with you, man? Have you become suddenly demented?"

"Ay!" he replied, dashing his cap on the ground with a force and fierceness that made Hubert spring back in alarm, "you've said the word. I am demented. I've suffered enough,"

he continued, with a burst of anguish very painful, indeed, to hear. "I can bear no more. Let me die."

"Forbear, Ned!" I sternly and authoritatively exclaimed, for I felt this was the only way to deal with him. "By raising your hand against yourself to escape present misery, which *must* and *can* be borne, you will destroy all your hopes of hereafter. Your present paroxysm of grief will abate, and you will then view matters differently. Give heed to what the good young man you have just abruptly quitted may say to you. Go back to him, — go back at once, or you will for ever forfeit my esteem — and return to me when you are calmer."

Ned looked at me for a moment, wildly, almost savagely, but he gradually quailed beneath my steady gaze, groaned, let his head fall upon his breast, and, without a word, went back to John, who was standing beneath the porch anxiously watching us, and re-entered the cottage with him.

I returned to the arbour with Hubert, who seemed instinctively to comprehend that something distressing was happening to his master, for he whined and looked quite downcast.

A long interval occurred before Ned's footsteps were again heard. Hubert and I came forth to meet him. The poor fellow's heart had evidently been melted — his eyes were red with recent tears.

"I am calmer now, sir," he said, in a low tone, and with a look of humble resignation; "I will do whatever you and Mr. Brideoake bid me."

"Then you must remain with me here till to-morrow, my poor friend," John Brideoake said, issuing from the porch. "You know why I desire you to stay," he added, with a certain significance, "and what I would have you do."

"I do, sir," Ned replied; "and I hope Heaven will grant me strength to go through with it!"

At this juncture the sound of carriage wheels was heard in the distance, and Mr. Hazilrigge's barouche, with the ladies inside it, could be descried coming slowly along the road towards the cottage.

"Make my excuses to Miss Hazilrigge, Mervyn," John cried, hastily. "I cannot see her or Ora to-day. Come over to me to-morrow morning. I have much to say to you. This poor fellow," he added, pointing to Ned, "will remain with me. He will have need of preparation — and so shall I — for the painful task which we have to perform. Farewell, my dear friend!"

Signing to Ned Culcheth to come with him, John then retired, and Hubert followed them into the cottage.

I met the carriage at the gate, and made the best excuses I could for John. Both ladies displayed great interest concerning him, and I had some difficulty in preventing Miss Hazilrigge from getting out to see him. She felt sure she could be of service to him, she declared. Could she send him anything? — wine — chicken-broth — calves-foot jelly, or blanc-mange? I declined all for my friend. At last the steps were let down, and I got into the carriage, taking a place beside Cuthbert Spring.

We had not a very cheerful drive back to Owlarton Grange, for a gloom was cast over the party by the accounts I gave them of poor John's alarming state of health.

CHAPTER XII.

The Legend of Owlarton Grange. — My Adventure in the Haunted Chamber.

MR. HAZILRIGGE was out when we returned to the grange, and recent occurrences indisposing me for anything like light conversation, I at once withdrew to my own room, and continued there until the hour for dinner had arrived.

On descending, I found good, kind Miss Hazilrigge consulting with her brother about the propriety of having John Brideoake at the grange to be nursed, and the worthy old gentleman told her to do just as she pleased. She had his full consent to send for John at once, and nurse him as long as might be needful. I offered no objection, of course, though I felt almost certain that John would not accede to the arrangement. Cuthbert Spring expressed extraordinary sympathy for the invalid, and offered many suggestions for his benefit; but I could not help fancying that the interest he manifested was not entirely disinterested, but had its origin in a desire to please Miss Hazilrigge.

Ora's vivacity had completely deserted her, and I could scarcely recognise in her the lively girl of the day before. Very little conversation passed between us at dinner. This was more my own fault than hers, I suspect, for she was too quick not to perceive that my manner towards her was changed; neither could she be ignorant of the cause of the alteration. There was no longer any exchange of speaking glances between us, but on the contrary a growing coldness, which we both of us understood and felt, though neither cared to explain.

If there was any flirting that day, it was between Cuthbert Spring and Miss Hazilrigge, and I began to think it not unlikely that a match might be struck up between them. The ladies retired soon after dinner, for Ora complained of a severe headache.

Supernatural stories of course formed the staple of our conversation while discussing our claret. Our host inquired whether I had ever heard the legend connected with his house, and on my answering in the negative, and expressing a great desire to hear it, he was good enough to relate it to me.

"You have no doubt," he premised, "remarked a curious picture hanging over the mantelpiece in the haunted chamber?"

I replied in the affirmative, and that the picture had struck me forcibly.

"The principal personage represented is my great-grandfather, Clotten Hazilrigge, surnamed, from his parsimonious habits, the 'Miser.' The figure standing behind him is his much-trusted, but perfidious servant, Jotham Shocklach. Old Clotten little thought, when causing that portrait to be painted, that he would preserve the features of his murderer."

"The portraits are admirably painted," I observed, "and the artist must have caught the exact expression of the originals."

"He was too indifferently paid, I make no doubt, to flatter. Old Clotten looks like what he was, and Jotham has the air of an assassin. But to my story. Clotten Hazilrigge had one son, Leycester, with whom he quarrelled, on account of his alleged extravagance, though I really believe the young man gave him no just cause of complaint on that score. But the miser could not bear to part with money even to his only son. His wife — fortunately, perhaps, for her — died about three years after their marriage — tradition says of a broken

heart, but this is beside the purpose. Clotten lived by himself at the grange, and his penurious habits increased as he grew older. He was morose, unsociable, tyrannical, and was disliked both by tenants and neighbours. He visited no one, invited no one, and would allow no one to enter the house except on matters of business. He discharged all his servants except Jotham Shocklach, and in him, who merited the trust so little, he reposed implicit confidence.

“Now it was well known that old Clotten had vast hoards of gold secreted in the house, and his steward often remonstrated with him on the danger he ran from robbers by keeping such large sums of money in his possession; but the miser despised the warnings; denying that he had any secret hoards, and declaring that if thieves broke into the house they would find nothing. And Jotham privately confirmed the assertion, for though he knew, he said, that his master must have a heap of treasure somewhere about the premises, he could never find out where it was secreted.

“But he did discover the hidden store at last. One night, it is supposed — for this must rest on conjecture — he entered his master’s bed-chamber, and found, wide open, a narrow sliding door in the panels, of the existence of which he must have been previously unaware. Through this aperture he passed — stealthily, no doubt — and tracking a strait passage contrived in the thickness of the walls, arrived at a small chamber without a window, constructed for a priest’s hiding-place, for our family once were Papists. Here he discovered old Clotten, with a huge chest full of money-bags before him.

“No eye beheld them, no tongue related the dark transaction, yet the state in which all was subsequently found showed clearly what took place. Old Clotten must have sprung from his hoards like a tiger, and have seized Jotham

by the throat, for a piece of the villain's cravat was found in the miser's gripe. But Jotham was a strong man, and, no doubt, shook himself easily free. With a heavy mallet, which it is supposed he picked up in the priest's hiding-place, he dealt his master a fatal blow on the head, and then stuffing his pockets with gold, and taking as many money-bags as he could carry, hurried to the secret door.

"His horror and fright may be conceived on finding it closed. The lamp brought by his master had been crushed and extinguished in the death-struggle. It was found beneath the miser's body. In vain the murderous villain searched for the secret spring. In vain he tried to batter open the door with the mallet. It was of stout oak, and resisted his attempts. He was caught in a trap from which there was no escape. He would only be liberated to meet the shameful death he merited. Yet a worse fate awaited him in his self-contrived prison.

"Next day, some tradesfolk from Weverham came to the house, but finding none to answer them, they went away. This did not excite surprise, for the miser's habits were so eccentric that it was thought he might have gone forth with his servant; but when he did not return on the succeeding day, some alarm began to be felt. Still no one entered the house until the evening of the third day after the murder, when the steward and some of the villagers got in through a window, and, after searching about, went to the miser's bedroom. While there, they heard a faint knocking against the wall. Somebody must be shut up there, the steward cried — old Clotten, or Jotham — perhaps both. He called out, and the knocking was renewed, but very feebly. Then there was a groan, and all became silent. After some search, the secret door was discovered; the spring was touched, and it flew open.

“A terrible spectacle presented itself to the steward, who was the first to enter — Jotham Shocklach lying dead with the mallet in his hand. The wretch had only just expired. Bags of money were near him, and the floor of the narrow passage was strewn over with pieces of gold. They dragged out the body of the murderer, and then, proceeding further, discovered his victim. All was now explained.

“After old Clotten’s tragical end, my grandfather, of course, came into possession of the property, and caused the secret door to be nailed up. Notwithstanding this, the restless spirit of Jotham Shocklach disturbed the house. Mysterious knockings, groans, and other appalling sounds were heard in that room at dead of night. These nocturnal disturbances, however, had ceased for many years, and only began again about four months ago, when Cuthbert Spring occupied the haunted chamber.”

Tea being announced soon after this recital, we obeyed the summons, and found Miss Hazilrigge alone, for Ora’s headache having increased, she had retired for the night. As we could have no music, in consequence of Miss Doveton’s indisposition, we sat down to a rubber of whist, and, in cutting for partners, Mr. Spring fell to Miss Hazilrigge’s share — a circumstance that diverted them immensely. I felt so *distract* that I scarcely knew what I was about, and it is surprising that I did not commit some unpardonable blunders. We did not play more than one game, which was won by the old bachelor and his partner, and then Miss Hazilrigge bade us good night, saying she must see how Ora was going on. As on the former occasion, Mr. Spring gallantly attended her to the door, where they had a few more “last words.”

No further bell-ringing having taken place that night I deferred my solution of the mystery till the morrow, but I put a few more questions to our host relative to Dr. Hooker.

From Old Hazy's description of the Doctor, he appeared to be well skilled in chiromancy, physiognomy, necromancy, natural and judicial astronomy, could cast nativities, interpret dreams, and do many other wonderful things besides. I dare say the old gentleman did not tell me half the delusions that had been practised upon him by the Doctor, but he told me quite enough to show me to what extent he had been duped. I tried in vain to open his eyes to the man's real character. He would not believe that he was a charlatan. The world, he said, always called the wisest men charlatans, but he knew better, and would never join in the senseless cry. Dr. Hooker had not overrated his influence over his dupe. When I affirmed that I was certain that Hooker had rung the bells, I rather raised than lowered him in the old gentleman's opinion, for he declared that such a feat could not have been accomplished except by supernatural aid; and this alone was sufficient to establish the Doctor's extraordinary powers. No, no; I must not attempt to depreciate such a man. I did not reveal what I knew of the galvanic battery and the electric wires — for I kept that disclosure for another occasion. Cuthbert Spring made no remarks about Dr. Hooker, for he knew the man, and was too well aware of Old Hazy's peculiarities to meddle with them.

Midnight had nearly arrived before our host released us.

Once more I was alone in the haunted chamber. Again I glanced at the portraits of the miser and his murderous servant, and, now that I was acquainted with the legend connected with the picture, it impressed me still more powerfully. In consequence, no doubt, of the story I had heard from Old Hazy, superstitious fancies crowded thickly upon me, and all my efforts to shake them off were unavailing. As on the previous night, I drew back the heavy curtain from before the deep bay-window, and allowed the moonlight to stream

into the chamber. I took some precautions which I had not deemed needful on the former occasion. Taking my case of duelling-pistols from my portmanteau, I loaded the weapons, and laid them on the table. Then seating myself in an easy-chair, I determined to keep watch, but in spite of my resolutions of vigilance, sleep after awhile stole over my eyelids.

How long I slumbered I cannot say, but I was suddenly aroused by a strange and startling noise, which I at once recognised as the ghostly knocking described by Cuthbert Spring. I listened intently. After the lapse of about a minute there was another heavy blow as if dealt by a mallet — a third — a fourth — up to ten; with the same intervals between each.

The unearthly sounds seemed to proceed from the lower part of the wall on the left of the bed. But they did not appear to be stationary. On the contrary, the blows were dealt at various points inside the wainscot.

I am not ashamed to own that I felt appalled. My taper had burnt out, and the wan light of the moon, which must have been struggling with passing clouds, only served to make darkness visible. The further end of the chamber in which the bed stood was plunged in deep shade.

While peering into this obscurity I fancied I saw a figure standing near the bed. It was perfectly motionless, and scarcely distinguishable; but as far as I could make it out, the attire of the phantom — or semblance of attire — was like that worn by Jotham Shocklach, as represented in the portrait — while the features, as far as they could be discerned — were those of the murderous servant. Something like a thin shroud hung over the lower part of the figure, and in its right hand it held a mallet.

Terror completely transfixed me. I strove to speak — but my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. My limbs refused

their office, and I could not grasp my pistols. The figure remained motionless and stationary, half concealed by the dark drapery of the bed, from which it could scarcely be distinguished. As I gazed at it, for I could not withdraw my eyes, it began to glide slowly towards me. No sound that I could detect attended its progress.

My terror increased. At length the phantom came under the influence of a ray of moonlight streaming athwart the chamber, which lighted up its ghastly and cadaverous features. It then paused; and at that moment I recovered my firmness, for I felt convinced that I had to do with one of mortal mould. Starting to my feet, I demanded of the ghost, in tones that sounded hoarse and strange in my own ears, — who it was, — and what it wanted?

The apparition made no answer, but pointed to the door, as if enjoining my departure. But I did not move.

“You would fain persuade me,” I cried, in a bolder tone than I could at first assume, “that you are the restless spirit of the murderer, Jotham Shocklach. But I know better. Unless I am much mistaken, we have met before, and this is not the first time I have seen you play the ghost.”

The phantom was evidently much discomposed, and I felt satisfied that I was right in my conjecture.

“It is useless to attempt to impose upon me further,” I cried, in a voice of thunder. “I know you, rascal. You are Dr. Hooker, alias Simon Pownall.”

The ghost would have beaten a hasty retreat, but I snatched up a pistol.

“Attempt to stir,” I exclaimed, levelling it at him, “and I will send you to join the miscreant whose likeness you have assumed.”

Probably the ghost thought I should put my threat into

execution, and seeing no chance of escape, dropped on its knees.

"Spare me!" it ejaculated in a piteous voice, which I instantly recognised as that of Simon Pownall — "spare me, and I will confess all."

"Ho! ho! So it is you, then, Pownall?" I cried.

"Why, yes; there's no use in denying it, since you've found me out."

"Well, get up," I cried, drawing near to him. "I don't want to take your life, or even harm you, unless you force me to do so by attempting to escape. You are my prisoner. You must answer to Mr. Hazilrigge for entering his house in this unlicensed manner; as well as passing yourself off upon him under a false name. I have been in search of you, but I little expected to find you here."

By this time, Simon, finding that I did not mean to injure him, had recovered some of his natural audacity.

"I can easily satisfy old Hazy," he replied. "He won't punish me."

"Don't make too sure of that, rascal," I returned. "Mr. Hazilrigge is credulous and good-humoured, but he will not allow such liberties as these to be taken with impunity. This is not the only trick you have played since my arrival at Owlarton Grange. You rang the bells better than you have played the ghost."

At this remark, Simon seemed entirely to forget the jeopardy in which he stood, and laughed long and heartily.

"A capital joke! — wasn't it?" he cried, with a fresh explosion of laughter.

"I don't quite appreciate the joke," I rejoined, sternly, "neither I think, will Mr. Hazilrigge, when he learns that the bells were rung by an electrical machine under your management. You will be prosecuted for the offence."

"You are mistaken, sir. Mr. Hazilrigge will treat the matter as a jest, and pass it by." The rascal spoke so confidently, that I felt staggered, and, perceiving it, he went on: "But let us leave this question of the bell-ringing and pass to your own concerns. What cause of complaint have you against me?"

"Dare you put such a question to me, sirrah, when you know how much mischief you have done me? The day of reckoning has been long postponed, but at last it has arrived, and I mean to have a settlement in full."

"You go the wrong way to work," he replied, in a tone of dogged defiance. "You will get nothing from me by threats. Adopt another course, and you will stand a better chance of gaining your object."

"I understand what you mean," I rejoined; "but I will make no terms with you. You fancy yourself secure, but you will be forced to give an account of your conduct — not to me only, but to another whom you have injured. You have hitherto contrived to hide yourself from poor Ned Culcheth, but you will now have to brave his just indignation. How will you answer him when he demands back his wife from you? Will you give her to him?"

"I cannot," he replied, sullenly.

"Then she has left you?" I cried.

"I will answer no questions about her," he replied. "If Ned believes she ran away with me, he is welcome to think so. I shan't contradict him. But he won't find her with me, and he won't learn from me where to find her — that I can promise him. But I will tell you, sir, since you seem to interest yourself in the matter, that it will be happier — far happier for Ned — never to see her again, than to see her as she is."

"What do you mean?" I exclaimed, startled by his words,

which seemed to corroborate some fears that had been aroused within me by the obscure remarks of John Brideoake.

"I have said I will answer no more questions — and I mean to keep to my word," he returned.

The audacity of the man quite confounded me.

I considered what I should do with him. I could not let him go, and yet felt unwilling to disturb the house. Besides, the rascal's unconcern added to my perplexity, and I almost fancied there might be some sort of understanding between him and Mr. Hazilrigge, though I could hardly reconcile such a notion with my ideas of the old gentleman's sense of propriety. If he had employed Pownall for any purpose, it must have been because he was in total ignorance of the man's character.

At length, I asked my prisoner how he got into the room?

"I didn't come through the keyhole, though it looks like it," he replied, with a laugh. "But I've no objection to tell you, provided you promise to keep the information secret."

"I will give no such promise," I replied. "It is quite enough for me to be aware that there is a concealed entrance to the room to be able to find it out. I have merely to sound the walls to make the discovery."

"Something more than sounding the walls is required," Pownall rejoined; "but since you decline my offer, you must exercise your own ingenuity. May I ask what you intend to do with me? I presume you don't mean to keep me here all night?"

"I haven't quite decided," I replied; "but one thing is quite certain — you won't be allowed to depart."

"As you please, sir," he replied, in an indifferent tone. "But, methinks, you'll be tired of my company before I am of yours. I am by no means sorry to have an opportunity of a

little confidential chat with you, as it may lead to a result advantageous to both of us."

"How so?" I cried.

"To begin — you will do well to make a friend of me."

"I am of a contrary opinion. But let me hear what advantage I am likely to gain by a partnership with a rogue and a traitor."

"Nay, if you employ such terms as those, we are not likely to come to any understanding," he rejoined, sharply. "It seems to me, that for so shrewd a young gentleman as you appear to be, you are singularly blind to your own interests."

"Why, yes, I happen to have notions on the score of honesty and straightforward conduct which appear highly absurd to you, Pownall, I make no doubt. But such as they are, I act up to my opinions. I am quite sure you could serve me materially if you would; but I am equally certain you won't."

"Why are you so certain of it, may I ask, sir?"

"Because, by doing so, you would incur the chance of a tolerably long term of penal servitude."

"That would not be very pleasant, I admit. But why take such a view of the case? The course I propose would accomplish your object, and bring no one into trouble — least of all, your humble servant."

"I see very plainly what you are driving at, Pownall," I rejoined, "and I am glad to learn that it is yet in your power to repair the mischief you have done."

"It is quite in my power to put you in possession of your uncle Mobberley's property, if you mean that," he replied.

"You confess it then, scoundrel," I cried — "you confess you stole the rightful will. You shall be compelled to produce it before a Court of Justice."

"Stop, sir," he rejoined. "You are getting on a leetle too fast. I may readily admit certain matters to you which I should be loth to admit if a third person were present; but as to compelling me to produce the will in a Court of Justice, you must first prove the existence of such a document, and next, that I have got it — neither of which you can easily do. For you may rely upon it that if any steps are taken against me, such as you threaten, the precious document in question will be destroyed. Now, sir, you will know how to act."

And he burst into a mocking laugh, which provoked me to such a degree that I felt inclined to brain him with the butt-end of the pistol.

"Come! come! my good young sir," he cried, checking his ill-timed hilarity, apprehensive, perhaps, of irritating me too much, "let us be reasonable. An affectation of stern morality may have great influence with some folks — with me it has none at all. I am apt to be sceptical when a man deliberately tells me that he will sacrifice his own interests for a point of principle. He takes me for a fool, but I know him to be a hypocrite. Now, you are a person of good sense — a little too hasty, perhaps — but shrewd enough when you choose to exercise your judgment properly. Look at the matter as it ought to be looked at. There is only one way in which you can ever gain your point — namely, by employing me."

"By buying you, in short."

"Well, by buying me, if you like the term. Of course, you can't expect to get a good thing for nothing, and won't grumble at paying for it."

"You are a cool hand, Simon!" I cried, with irrepressible disgust, "and persuade yourself that your criminality cannot be proved. You are deceived. There is a witness who can tell how you purloined that will, and I will obtain his evidence."

"No, you won't, sir," he rejoined, in a tone of defiance. "The man you allude to will never peach. He would rather bite off his tongue than utter a word to serve you, so bring him forward and welcome. Much good Phaleg will do you — ha! ha! But I am sure you must have had enough of my society, so I'll relieve you of it."

"Hardly so," I rejoined. "You will not quit this room, unless I consign you to some one who will detain you in safe custody till the morrow."

"It will be useless to ring," he observed, with a laugh. "All the servants are a-bed, and, even if they heard the bell, they wouldn't answer it. I will summon assistance for you, for I am as anxious to be gone as you can be to get rid of me."

And, before I could prevent him, he struck three heavy blows with his mallet, which he still held, upon the floor. While I was wondering what would ensue, a tap was heard at the door, and a voice which sounded like that of Mr. Hazilrigge inquired what was the matter?

Greatly surprised, I called to the old gentleman to come in — but after waiting for a moment, finding that my request was not attended to, I sprang to the door, opened it, and looked out.

No one was there that I could discern, for it was pitch-dark in the corridor. Neither did any one answer when I spoke. I did not think it possible that Pownall could have stirred without my hearing him; and not the slightest sound reached my ears. But when I turned, he was gone.

Greatly provoked, I proceeded to search the room, hoping to detect a sliding panel or secret door through which he might have passed. But in vain.

CHAPTER XIII.

Wherein Old Hazy endeavours to persuade me that I have been deluded by an Evil Spirit.

THAT Simon Pownall would return to his own room in the Old Grange by some secret passage communicating with it, I nothing doubted; but that he would be found there in the morning appeared highly improbable. Unless, therefore, I intended to let him get off altogether, I must effect his recapture without loss of time.

It was provoking in the extreme to be outwitted and derided by the rascal. Yet what could be done? To alarm the house and obtain the assistance of the servants seemed the only course to be pursued under the circumstances; but the objections to such a step were twofold. In the first place, I must necessarily create a great disturbance — and this I did not like to do. Secondly, it was almost certain that Old Hazy would prohibit any interference with his associate. The extraordinary audacity exhibited by Simon Pownall could only arise from confidence in the hold he had, by some means or other, obtained over the credulous old gentleman.

What was to be done? I asked myself again. Unable to answer the question satisfactorily, I at length made up my mind to abide patiently till the morrow. And so I retired to rest.

Sleep, though long in coming, visited me at last, and I had just opened my eyes in the morning when Mr. Ponder entered my room, and approaching the foot of my bed, observed, with more than his usual gravity of manner, "I am

afraid, sir, you must have been a good deal disturbed last night."

I made no reply, and he continued:

"I feel assured that you must have had a visit from the ghost, sir. My bedroom is situated immediately above this chamber, and about one o'clock I heard the dreadful knocking quite distinctly. After that, I heard voices, as if a long conversation were taking place. Then came three startling knocks. And then all was still."

"If you heard this, Mr. Ponder, why on earth didn't you come down to me?" I demanded.

"Come down to you, sir!" he exclaimed. "Lord love you! I hadn't courage enough to get out of bed. I wouldn't have entered this room at that unearthly hour for fifty pounds — and that's more than my year's wages. On hearing the last three knocks I dived under the bed-clothes to shut the ghost from my sight in case it should rise through the floor."

"I did not suppose you were such a poltroon, Mr. Ponder."

"I am no coward in broad daylight, sir, but at dead of night, and in a haunted house like this — with supernatural objects swarming around you — it's a different matter altogether. I'm not ashamed to confess my fears. — But, save us! what's this?" he cried, starting back in affright. "As I'm a sinner, the ghost has left its mallet behind it!"

"Indeed!" I exclaimed; "I didn't notice it. Reach it to me, Ponder."

"I wouldn't touch it for the world!" he cried, recoiling.

"Why, surely you don't imagine there can be mischief in that wooden hammer," I observed, laughing. "It won't strike you."

"I don't know that," he answered, in great trepidation. "At any rate, I won't give it the chance. Can I be of any

further use to you, sir?" he added, evidently anxious to depart.

I told him that I had a little commission which I wished him to execute for me; and on his promising prompt compliance, I bade him go to the old Grange, and ascertain whether Dr. Hooker was still there.

"Merely make the inquiry," I said, "without stating who sent you."

"I can satisfy you at once on the point, sir," he replied. "My master sent me with a message to the same gentleman more than an hour ago; and Stephen Blackden himself informed me that Doctor Hooker left at eight o'clock last night."

"Stephen Blackden must have misinformed you," I cried. "Doctor Hooker was here — in this very room — an hour after midnight."

"Here, sir!" Ponder ejaculated, staring at me. "Here! — in this room, an hour after midnight! Pray how did he get in?"

"That's more than I can explain. But here he was, most undoubtedly. And by your own account you must have heard him conversing with me. It was no ghost who visited me last night, Ponder, but a mortal like ourselves."

"I wish I had known that, sir," the butler replied; "I'd have been down with you in a trice. But you haven't told me in what manner the doctor disappeared."

"He vanished suddenly from my sight — that is all I can tell you. He may be hidden in the room now, for aught I know to the contrary!"

"Zounds! sir, I hope not. Mayhap he flew through the window. It wouldn't be a difficult feat for a conjuror — and folks say the doctor is one. I wonder my master likes the

society of a man who, beyond all doubt, must be in league with Beelzebub."

"Is the doctor, as you style him, much with Mr. Hazilrigge?" I inquired.

"More than he should be, if I may presume to say so," Ponder replied. "He is often with my master in the library, and there they sit poring for hours over those abominable books of witchcraft and magic. I should like to see 'em all burnt; and so would Miss Hazilrigge, for I've heard her say so."

"I should rejoice in such an *auto da fe* myself," I rejoined. "I wish the Holy Inquisition could get hold of Doctor Hooker. Miss Hazilrigge, I am sure, cannot approve of such a person."

"Approve of him! — not she, sir. But my master has his fancies, and won't be interfered with by his sister, or by any one else. Doctor Hooker has got an unaccountable influence over him. But perhaps I've said too much on this subject already, sir?"

And receiving no answer, for I had fallen into a reverie, the butler bowed respectfully, as was his wont, and retired.

As it was pretty certain now that Simon Pownall had decamped, I was forced to abandon all idea of recapturing him for the present. Before going down stairs, however, I took another and more rigorous survey of the room—examined the panels, and struck them here and there with the mallet which my nocturnal visitor had left behind, but could detect nothing to indicate a secret door. I specially directed my attention to that part of the chamber where the bed was placed; but the panels seemed just as solid here as elsewhere. Wherever it might be, the entrance was exceedingly well concealed, and completely baffled my researches.

After this, I went down stairs. Nothing worthy of note

occurred at breakfast, except that Ora did not join the party. I made no allusion to my adventure overnight — reserving what I had to say for my host's private ear. Luckily, I was not questioned on the subject; Miss Hazilrigge and Cuthbert Spring being too much occupied with each other to trouble themselves about me or Old Hazy.

As we rose from table, I volunteered to accompany the old gentleman to his sanctum; but I half repented the step when, on ushering me into the room, he closed the door, and, forcing me into a chair, without allowing me to utter a word of remonstrance, hurried to the bookshelves, and taking down a little volume, exclaimed,

“I must show you this treasure, Mr. Clitheroe. It is a rare little treatise called the Antidemon of Macon, containing a true and particular relation of what a Demon said and did in the house of Father Perreaud. Let me read you a few passages from it. They are highly instructive, and well worth hearing, I assure you.”

“I have no doubt of it, my good sir,” I replied, impatiently. “But just now I have too much on my mind to attend to Father Perreaud. I want to open your eyes to the true character of the soi-disant Dr. Hooker, whom I must denounce as a charlatan — an impostor — and something worse.”

“You denounced him yesterday,” old Hazy rejoined, petulantly. “Why persist in assailing him? Doctor Dee was called a charlatan, an impostor, and something worse; and so were Paracelsus, Cornelius Agrippa, and the Alberts, Great and Little. There is hardly one amongst the professors of occult philosophy whose works load these shelves who has not been calumniated and reviled. But I shall ever protest against such injustice, Mr. Clitheroe. Here, in this sanctum, a true disciple of those glorious sages shall never be treated

with opprobrium. Dr. Hooker is a second Doctor Dee. As a physiognomist, he is equal to Taxil and Jean Indagine; in chiromancy, to Prætorius and Cocles; he can read the celestial influences as well as Father Francis; can cast a horoscope as well as Joseph de Tertiis; and pronounce a judgment upon a nativity as well as Fevrier and Ranzonius."

"He practises a great many more tricks than you are aware of, Mr. Hazilrigge," I rejoined. "I have discovered something about him that will astonish you. What do you think, sir? — last night, he personated the ghost of Jotham Shocklach."

"Ah! my good young sir," the old gentleman cried, regarding me with compassion, "you are deceived. You are unacquainted with the subtleties and devices of evil spirits. If the ghost of Jotham Shocklach did not actually appear to you — as is more than propable — it was an evil spirit in the guise of the defunct assassin — not Doctor Hooker."

"This is idle, sir," I cried, almost out of patience. "Suffer me to say that in this rascal, who personated the ghost of Jotham, and who calls himself Dr. Hooker, I discovered —"

"An evil spirit — I know it," Old Hazy exclaimed.

"No, sir; not an evil spirit, but a knave, who has cheated me, and duped you — and who continues to dupe you, sir."

Mr. Hazilrigge shook his head.

"A diabolical illusion, my good young friend. I can produce plenty of instances of the kind from Fathers Perreaud and Taillepie. Permit me to cite some of them."

"Pest take Fathers Perreaud and Taillepie!" I cried, impatiently. "Am I not to trust the evidence of my own eyes and my own ears?"

"Assuredly not, in a case of this kind. You ought to discredit all you see and hear. The plainer and more palpable

the thing appears, the more certain is the delusion. Such is the opinion of Father Perreaud, and I will refer to him for some observations in support of my argument. Attend to what he says in his eighth chapter touching demoniacal illusions: 'It cannot be doubted that demons can charm the eyes and ears in such manner externally, putting between the eye and the ear, and the thing seen or heard, a body which produces the effect they desire.' And further on, he adds: 'Demons, who are beyond comparison more subtle than all the most subtle of men, can deceive and elude our senses by a thousand false and deceitful appearances. This they can do either immediately of themselves, or mediately by magicians and sorcerers.' You hear the opinion of this erudite man. In your case, the delusion has been practised immediately, that is, without intervention, by an evil spirit."

"Pshaw!" I cried, "I am dealing with the material world. I told you the other night, sir, that I have no belief in evil spirits."

"I am sorry to hear you confess so much after your recent experience. As to the existence of evil spirits, I must again refer to Father Perreaud. Observe how he closes his first discourse, which is directed against those who, like yourself, are perverse and sceptical. 'It ought to be sufficient for us, after what we have heard, drawn from the word of God and from experience, that we are assured, or ought to be so, that spirits of evil exist in great abundance.' I will give you the father's words in his own language: *Qu'il y a vrayement et d'effect des diables et malins esprits, voire une grandissime et innombrable quantité! — Une grandissime quantité!* Mark that!" he added, regarding me with an air of triumph.

I did not attempt to reply; feeling it was useless to reason with him. I merely observed, therefore, "I sincerely wish you could divest yourself of this strange opinion for a moment,

sir. Why should not the person you call Dr. Hooker have found his way to my room?"

"For the best of all reasons — he was far away. No, no; trust me, Mr. Clitheroe, you have been deluded. Shall I give you another quotation from Father Perreaud?"

"On no account," I replied, hastily. "One more question, Mr. Hazilrigge, and I have done. Did you not overhear what was passing in my room last night?"

"I overhear what was passing!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Were you not summoned by three blows of a mallet on the floor? Did you not knock at my door, and inquire what was the matter?"

"Ah, my good young friend!" he cried, shaking his head compassionately, "if anything could convince you, this ought to do so. Why, sir, I was fast asleep in bed, and if there was a knock at your door, as you assert, and a voice heard like mine, it must have been a diabolic delusion. Taillepie gives an infallible test whereby you may know whether a demon has appeared to you. 'If the person whose semblance the spirit puts on strives to tempt you, or counsels a wicked action, you may be assured that the spirit is evil.' Was it so in your case?"

"I must confess," I replied, unable to refrain from laughter, "that the rascal did give me evil counsel, and tried to incite me to wrong."

"An evil spirit, beyond all question. Dr. Hooker would never have acted so. No, no, the demon has assumed the doctor's shape in order to beguile you."

"Then you absolutely refuse to believe that it was Dr. Hooker who visited me last night?"

"Absolutely and entirely."

"And you likewise refuse to believe that I recognised in

the soi-disant Hooker a knavish and runaway barber from Marston?"

"I entirely disbelieve it. You have been deluded by evil spirits, who, I grieve to say, abound in this house. Suffer me to read you a few passages from Thiræus *De locis infestis ob molestantes dæmoniorum et defunctorum spiritus.*"

But I had had quite enough. While he was searching for his tiresome Thiræus; Boissier's *Recueil de Lettres au sujet des Malefices et du Sortilege*; Martinus de Arles; and some other works of a like nature, which he particularised, but the titles of which I now forget, I took to flight.

As soon as I got into the hall, I snatched up my hat and rushed out into the garden, where I soon regained my tranquillity.

CHAPTER XIV.

Love in a Maze.

TAKE it altogether, I have never seen a more perfect specimen of an old-fashioned garden than that of Owlarton Grange. I have said little about it hitherto, because I have waited for a favourable opportunity of describing it.

The garden was originally laid out more than a couple of centuries ago, and its general plan was still carefully maintained. Some few alterations had no doubt been made in certain parts, but they were so slight as not to interfere with the principal features. The broad terrace walks, with the smooth green slopes, the stone steps for the mimic waterfalls, the "pleached bowers,"

Where honeysuckles, ripened by the sun,
Forbid the sun to enter —

the mossy seats upon the slopes — all these were the same as heretofore. The garden-knots, moreover, were extremely quaint and curious, and no departure from their pristine shape was permitted. There you could see the cinque-foil, the trefoil, the fleur-de-lis, the fret, and other designs, that had charmed the loiterers in this Eden during the time of James I., still embroidering the parterres. The preservation of the garden in its integrity was chiefly owing to Miss Hazilrigge, who paid great attention to it, and allowed nothing to be disturbed. She abominated "landscape gardeners," and said they had spoiled many of the finest old places in England. The garden at Owlarton Grange thus continued intact. Its long dark green alleys of clipped yew-trees — its magnificent hedges of holly — its marvellous specimens of topiarian art, exhibited in groups of trees, trimmed and twisted into a variety of fantastical devices, some of which looked as if Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had been put into action upon the lawns — its statues — dial — fountains — maze — and mound, with summer-house on the top, overlooking the moat — all these formed the admiration of the neighbourhood, and would have made the garden of Owlarton Grange one of the "sights" of that part of Cheshire, if its owner would have allowed it to be shown.

As the hall would have been incomplete without its garden, so the garden would not have been perfect without the hall. One was an indispensable adjunct to the other. The picturesque old pile was seen to the greatest advantage from the smooth-shaven lawn; while the garden looked enchanting as the bowers of Armida when beheld from the house.

I was wandering about this delightful garden — admiring its various objects of interest — now looking at a little fountain with a curious mechanical contrivance that caused a musical sound — now at a bay-tree, trimmed and twined into a re-

presentation of Daphne — now at a marble statue of Leda and the swan, weather-stained, and crusted with lichens — now pausing to look at the old hall, as it displayed itself under some new and picturesque aspect — when I perceived Ora hastening towards me across the lawn, and I instantly flew to meet her.

We walked together for some time, conversing upon indifferent topics, but I could perceive that she had something upon her mind, which she desired to mention, though she hesitated long ere coming to the point. At last she spoke of John Brideoake, and inquired, with some anxiety, whether I thought him alarmingly ill?

“I am indeed seriously apprehensive about him,” I replied. “He is suffering in mind as well as in body.”

“But, perhaps, some remedy might be found,” she cried, quickly. “If your friend has a secret sorrow, no doubt he imparted it to you — and it may, possibly, be relieved. Don’t you think so?”

I looked at her fixedly.

“If hope could be once more kindled in John’s breast,” I said, “he might perchance recover. At present, life is a blank to him. My poor friend has no secrets from me, Miss Doveton, and has laid bare his innermost heart to me. He has had the temerity to fix his affections on an object utterly unattainable, and is now paying the penalty of his folly.”

“But why should he conclude that the object is unattainable?” Ora rejoined.

“Because he feels that it would be the height of presumption in him to think otherwise. How should he — a poor curate — dare to aspire to the hand of a young and lovely heiress?”

“Some men have aspired, and successfully, Mr. Clitheroe.”

"Would you have him—the most modest of men—imitate the most audacious, Miss Doveton?" I exclaimed.

"I would have him get well—I would help to bring about his cure, if I could," she replied.

"A word from you will do it. You have only to make the experiment to see what a result will follow. Will you authorise me to give my friend a hope?"

"I cannot prevent you from saying anything you choose to him," she answered, smiling.

"That is hardly sufficient. You must promise that you will not contradict what I *do* say. Suppose I were to tell him that the fair being whom he thinks only laughed at him, takes a real interest in him, and grieves for the despairing state into which he has been thrown?"

"Enough! enough!" she interrupted. "No doubt you will say a great deal more than you ought to do—more than I shall ever authorise you to say. But at any rate, you *may* say that I sincerely hope he will get better."

"For your sake?" I said.

"You may add, 'for my sake,' if you think proper," she replied.

I uttered a joyful exclamation.

"If John is not too far gone already I will answer for his cure," I cried. "I am now bound for his cottage, and shall, indeed, be the bearer of good tidings."

"Do not go till you have seen my aunt," Ora said. "Perhaps she may drive over to Weverham in the course of the day, and if so I will accompany her."

"That will be a very kind act. It will do John an infinitude of good to see you. I will prepare him for the visit."

"Well, let us find my aunt," Ora cried, in a far more lively tone, for her spirits seemed to have wonderfully improved within the last few minutes, "and learn what she has

to say about it. I have no doubt she will go, unless she has fixed some other plan with Mr. Spring. They are somewhere in the garden — very likely in the maze. I saw them straying in that direction just before I joined you."

To the maze accordingly we repaired.

On entering the leafy labyrinth, we could distinctly hear the voices of the elderly couple, though, of course, they were hidden by the tall ranges of privet.

Ora stopped for a moment, gave me an arch look, and put her finger to her lips to impose silence.

"Well, here we are, I declare, in the very centre of the maze," Cuthbert Spring exclaimed. "I should never be able to find my way back through all its intricate windings without guidance."

"I have a good mind to leave you, and let you try," the elderly spinster replied, with a laugh.

"Oh! no, don't, I entreat of you," Mr. Spring rejoined. "Nay, indeed, I must detain you. This is the most inviting spot imaginable for a tête-à-tête. Let us be seated upon this bench, which seems contrived for lovers. No fear of interruption here, my dear Miss Hazilrigge."

"I don't know that," she replied. "Ora and Mr. Clitheroe are in the garden. I saw them as we emerged from the *allée verte* just now."

"I did not observe them," Cuthbert returned. "And in truth I had no eyes save for the charming person at my side."

"A truce to compliments, Mr. Spring," the elderly spinster simpered. "You have paid me too many already."

"Not one more than you deserve, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," Cuthbert said. "Shall I tell you what the meanderings of this maze have put into my head?"

"Pray do, Mr. Spring," she answered. "I am curious to know what they have suggested to you."

"They have convinced me that I should find my way much more readily through the twists and turnings which I have yet to take in life if I had some one to direct me."

"You have got on very well hitherto without assistance, Mr. Spring," Miss Hazilrigge replied.

Here Ora could not repress her laughter.

"What was that, Mr. Spring?" the elderly spinster cried. "I am sure I heard something. I hope there are no listeners near us."

"Have no fear, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," Cuthbert cried, in a more impassioned tone than he had yet assumed — I almost fancied he must have thrown himself upon his knees. "This is the moment when my fate must be sealed. You have it in your power to make me the happiest of men. Speak and decide!"

"Dear heart a day! Mr. Spring," the lady rejoined, evidently quite in a flutter, "you have taken me quite by surprise. I don't know what to say, I am sure. Your proposal is very flattering, but it requires consideration. Before answering you positively, I think — nay, I am quite sure — that I ought to consult my brother."

"By all means, my dear Miss Hazilrigge. Very proper! very proper! But I am confident my friend Hazilrigge won't oppose your wishes, when he learns which way they tend. So, after all, the decision will rest with you. You do not bid me despair."

"A regular proposal, I declare!" Ora exclaimed. "Oh, aunt!"

"Who's that?" Miss Hazilrigge cried, in alarm. "I am sure it must be Ora. Where are you, child? What are you doing?"

"I am making my way to you, aunt, through the maze, as fast as I can, with Mr. Clitheroe," Ora replied.

So saying, she hurried on, trying to repress her laughter, and the next moment we stood before the elderly pair of turtle-doves, both of whom, though they strove to put a good face upon the matter, looked excessively annoyed, as well they might, at the interruption.

"We were searching for you, aunt," Ora said. "Mr. Clitheroe is going to Weverham. I told him you would probably drive there in the course of the day. Have you any message for Mr. Brideoake?"

"Is that all?" Miss Hazilrigge cried, rather tartly. "There was no occasion to come to me on such a trivial matter. My message to Mr. Brideoake — which I beg Mr. Clitheroe will be good enough to deliver to his friend — is that my brother and myself hope that the dear young man will make arrangements to come and stay with us for a month. We can make him, perhaps, a little more comfortable than he is in his cottage, and he shall be well nursed."

"I will not fail to deliver your kind message to him," I replied, "and when you come, he will give you his answer."

"Nay, I will have no refusal," Miss Hazilrigge returned. "I mean to bring him away in the carriage."

"Be sure to tell him so," Ora subjoined. "And now, Mr. Clitheroe," she cried, with an arch look, "do not stir till I clap my hands, and then try to catch me. You must promise not to break through the fences, for that would not be fair."

She then disappeared, and in another moment I heard the signal given, accompanied by a merry laugh, and I set off after her — much to the relief, I am sure, of the elderly couple. But though I ran on and on, I must, somehow, have taken a wrong turn, and greatly to my surprise and an-

noyance found myself once more near the centre of the maze. Despairing of getting out unaided, I went into the little enclosure, where I found the elderly couple seated close together on the bench.

"What! you can't find your way out, Mr. Clitheroe?" Miss Hazilrigge said, rising. "The maze is very perplexing. I have known people puzzled by it for hours. Come! I will help you."

I glanced at my friend to let him know how sorry I was to interrupt him — but he took it very good humouredly, and Miss Hazilrigge preceding us, we were soon extricated from the labyrinth. Ora was standing outside, and appeared not a little diverted. Ever since she had taken me into her confidence — as I have just intimated — her former liveliness had completely returned to her; and she now looked as full of merriment and mischief as ever.

"Well, I must say, this maze is the most perplexing place I ever entered," Cuthbert Spring observed. "I would as soon attempt to unravel a tangled skein of thread as make my way out of it unassisted."

"You must always have my aunt for a guide, Mr. Spring," Ora observed, archly, "and then you will have no difficulty in tracking its meanderings — or in getting through any other twistings and turnings which you may have to take in life."

CHAPTER XV.

What happened in the orchard of the Mill in Weverham Glen.

I HAD quitted my friends at the Grange, and was pursuing the pleasant path across the fields leading to Weverham, when I saw Ned Culcheth, with Hubert at his heels, coming towards me from the opposite direction. Even at a distance I could perceive that the poor fellow was labouring under great depression, and, on joining him, I found that the judgment I had formed was correct. He was scarcely able to open his lips, and we walked together, side by side, for some little time in silence. Arrived at a stile, I besought him to try and ease his breast of its cares.

"Of a truth, my breast does need lightening, sir," he replied, with a groan. "A feather's weight more of care would crush me. Ah! sir, what I have gone through since we parted yesterday no words of mine can tell."

Then after a pause, during which he struggled with his violent emotion, he added — "I have seen her, sir."

"Your wife!" I exclaimed, starting.

"Ay, sir — Sissy; and I almost wish I had *not* seen her. Oh! sir," he continued, with a despairing look, "there have been moments when, maddened by jealous passion, I have wished ill to Sissy — but never, never, sir — I take Heaven to witness! — never did I wish her ill like this!"

"You fill me with terrible apprehensions, Ned," I rejoined, regarding him anxiously. "Relieve me, if you can."

"I can scarcely bring myself to speak it," he rejoined, with an agonised look, "but it must out. Sissy is no longer herself, sir. I stood beside her and she did not know me.

I spoke to her in the tenderest way I could — called her by her name, and told her I forgave her, as I did from the bottom of my heart — but she paid no heed to me. I tried to clasp her in my arms, and fold her to my breast, but she pushed me off with horror. Oh! sir, I shall never forget the look she gave me. It froze the very blood in my veins. Much as I love her — for I do love her still, in spite of all that has passed — I don't think I can have her to live with me again. I could have borne it better if she had known me — but this state drives me almost mad myself — and Mr. Brideoake gives me no hopes whatever of her recovery.”

“How long has she been thus afflicted, Ned?” I inquired, after a pause.

“You shall hear the whole sad story, sir,” he replied, “for I now feel able to tell it. On the day after she left my roof, she was brought, by a man who represented himself to be her husband, to the Plough at Weverham — the little inn at the door of which you saw me standing yesterday. There is no doubt from the description given of him by the landlady of the Plough that the man who brought Sissy was Simon Pownall. Well, Simon left her — saying he would fetch her on the morrow — but he never returned. When she first arrived at the Plough, Sissy was ill and excited — but she soon got worse. On the second day, a brain fever came on, and she was at times quite light-headed. Mrs. Vines, the landlady — a good, kind-hearted soul — did not know what to do with her guest. Ill as she was she could not turn her out of the house, and yet it was almost impossible to keep her. Poor Sissy would not give any account of herself, but declared she was a wretched, guilty thing, and only wished to die. Sorely put about and distressed, Mrs. Vines thought the best thing she could do was to consult the curate, and, on hearing her relation, Mr. Brideoake came down with her

to see the unfortunate guest — and, to his surprise and grief, found that the poor sufferer was Sissy.

“Well, sir, as Mr. Brideoake told me yesterday, the poor creature, on seeing him, was terrified almost out of her senses — and supplicated him not to send her back to me, as I should certainly kill her — she knew I should. Her terror was so great, that the worthy young gentleman, believing that violence on my part was to be apprehended — though Heaven knows his fears were unjust — promised to screen her till my anger should pass away. And he kept his promise, as you know. Indeed, he would not disclose her retreat to me yesterday, until I had solemnly pledged my word not to harm her.

“But to proceed with my narration. After seeing Mr. Brideoake, Sissy got worse. The fever lasted for a week, and when it left her, her senses were gone — never more — as it seems, to return. She was removed to the mill in Weverham Glen, where a room was engaged for her by Mr. Brideoake, and where she has been ever since.”

“And Mr. Brideoake has been at all charges for her, I suppose?”

“Heaven bless him for his kindness! — yes, sir. He watched over her during her illness, and prayed constantly by her side. That she is still living is mainly — if not entirely — owing to his care. If there is a good man on earth, it is Mr. Brideoake. I would go through fire and water to serve him. I have met two friends in him and you, sir — two such friends as a poor man like me seldom meets. But there is another point on which it is right I should speak to you, sir — painful though it be to me to mention it. It is Mr. Brideoake’s firm opinion that Simon Pownall, and not Captain Sale, is the author of all this misery. Poor Sissy, he says, as good as confessed this to him, when he questioned

her. She never mentioned the other at all — but spoke only of Simon."

"That does not convince me, Ned," I rejoined. "You may think me unwilling to acquit Mr. Sale — perhaps I am so — but I am persuaded he is the real offender. The truth will come out some day, and then you will find who is in the right."

"Well, I own that I incline to your opinion myself," he returned. "But it is strange that Sissy should make such a declaration."

"A good deal depends upon the way in which she was interrogated. Mr. Brideoake's suspicions of Malpas were not then aroused, and no doubt, in ascertaining the name of Simon Pownall, he thought he had elicited the whole truth. Moreover, Sissy herself might have wished to screen her betrayer."

"That's true," Ned replied, with a sombre look. "I didn't think of that. Mr. Brideoake preaches forgiveness to me, and I would willingly follow his counsels. But I find it hard to forgive injuries like these. When I think of Sissy — in her present woful state, and what has caused it — I must be more than man, or less than man, not to nourish vengeance against the author of the wrong."

I made no reply, for I could not contradict him.

After another pause, I said, "I suppose it is impossible now to obtain any further information from poor Sissy?"

"Quite impossible, sir," he replied. "Poor soul! she can give no rational answer to any questions put to her. Yet she is very gentle and easily managed. The good folks at the mill are extremely kind to her. Master Mavis, the miller, and his dame treat her like one of the family, and their little daughter, Grace, is constantly with her. I hope you will come with me to see her, sir. Mr. Brideoake himself is at the mill, and

waits your arrival there. He sent me to meet you and bring you to him."

Though I felt it would pain me exceedingly to behold poor Sissy in her present forlorn state, I could not refuse to accompany Ned, and so put myself under his guidance.

Our course, it appeared, lay to the right, for Ned struck off in that direction, and after crossing a few fields, we gained the high road, along which we proceeded for about a quarter of a mile, and then again diverging to the right, reached the edge of the rocky glen which I had seen on first approaching Weverham.

From these craggy heights which looked like the frowning battlements of a castle, nearly the whole of the glen was visible; beginning at the point where the alpine bridge was stretched across it, and where the rocks were highest and most precipitous, and terminating where the banks were much lower and further apart, and where the stream, checked by a dam, had expanded almost into a lake. The mill itself was situated at the widest part of this pool, and with its floodgate, bridge, and large water-wheels — formed an extremely picturesque feature in the scene. Adjoining the mill, and bounding the further side of the pool, was a large orchard, and in this pleasant place I saw three persons walking — a young woman, a little girl, and a man attired in black. I had no doubt who these persons were, and on consulting Ned by a glance, he answered my mute inquiry with a look that told me I was right in my conjecture.

Following my conductor down a zigzag path hewn in the rock, I soon gained the bottom of the ravine, and proceeding along a road, shaded by tall trees, and skirted by the brawling stream, we ere long reached the pool. We next crossed a narrow bridge thrown over the rapid mill-race, and entered a

yard, where Mavis and two of his men were busily employed in loading a cart with sacks of flour. Ned said a word to the miller, and the good man touched his dusty cap to me, and we passed on. A few steps more brought us to the door of the dwelling, which stood open, and Ned entering without ceremony, called out for Dame Mavis. At the summons, a fresh-complexioned, tidy little woman, of middle age, came out of an inner room, and seeing me dropped a curtsy, and bade me welcome. In reply to Ned's inquiries, Dame Mavis told us we should find Sissy in the orchard with Mr. Brideoake and her little daughter, and, as Ned knew the way thither, there would be no occasion for her to attend us; whereupon she retired.

Before entering the orchard, I paused at the gate to look at Sissy, and being partially concealed by the hedge, neither she nor her companion noticed me. She was not so much changed as I anticipated, and except from a certain flightiness of manner and a strange look about the eyes, I should not have deemed her mind to be affected. Though her attire was not arranged with the care she had once bestowed upon it, it was still neat; and it was evident, from the knots of ribands stuck upon her dress here and there, that her love of finery was not entirely effaced. Her long and beautiful tresses were unbound, and floated in disorder over her neck and shoulders, giving her rather a wild look. In manner she seemed extremely gentle. Her little attendant, Grace, who might be about seven or eight years old, had twined her a wreath of honeysuckles, and was in the act of placing the simple garland over her brows at the moment of my arrival. Delighted with the effect of the wreath when so disposed, little Grace clapped her hands with childish glee; and Sissy, no less pleased, cried out to the little girl, "Does it not suit me? Am I not pretty? — am I not pretty?"

"Indeed you are," little Grace replied. "You look very pretty in that wreath, Sissy."

Here John Brideoake interposed, and taking the wreath from Sissy's brows, gave it back to little Grace. The poor sufferer did not in any way oppose him, though she seemed sorry to lose the ornament.

"You must promise me to tie up your hair to-morrow, Sissy — will you not?" John said.

She assented with a motion of the head, and presently inquired, "Do I look better with my hair tied up?"

"Much better," John replied.

Upon this the poor thing instantly sat down upon the grass, and plucking off one of the bows of ribbon from her dress, was proceeding to gather together her luxuriant tresses, when John interrupted her, saying, "Not now, Sissy. Another time. Let us continue our walk. Come with me."

But at this moment an irrepressible groan burst from Ned, and the sound attracting Sissy's attention, she touched John's arm, and pointed in the direction where we stood. Finding I was discovered, I opened the gate, and entered the orchard; and as soon as he was able to control himself, Ned followed. I went up at once to Sissy; but on addressing her by name, and holding out my hand to her, she merely dropped me a bashful curtsy.

"Won't you shake hands with the gentleman, Sissy?" little Grace said to her.

Before complying, Sissy consulted John Brideoake by a look, and having obtained his permission, gave me her hand. As I held it for a moment it felt cold as marble.

"Do you not know me, Sissy?" I said, looking hard at her. "I am your old friend, Mervyn Clitheroe."

She shook her head, and exhibited no sign of recognition.

“Don’t you remember our merry-making on Twelfth Night, in Farmer Shakeshaft’s barn at Marston, Sissy?” I continued. “I was king on that night, and you were queen.”

“I never was a queen, an’ please you, sir,” she replied. “I’m only a poor country girl — from Wales, sir.”

“Yes, I know that,” I rejoined; “but try if you can’t recollect me.”

She again shook her head, and said, “You’re a pretty young gentlemans, sir, put I never saw you pefore.”

“Oh, you are ‘quite mistaken!’” I rejoined. “You have often seen me with your husband, honest Ned Culcheth. Yonder he stands. Look at him.”

“I haf no huspants, sir,” she answered; adding, with a strange, half-terrified, mysterious look, “I must never be married.”

“Indeed! why not?” I asked, willing to humour her.

“I’ve had my fortunes told, sir, by a plack gipsy oomans, an’ she said I should make a pad wife — a fery pad wife — and pring sorrow an’ shame on my huspants — so I must never marry — oh, no, I must never marry.”

“But if your husband should be a good man, and a kind man, Sissy, he might forgive your faults, however great they might be, and take you back to him.”

“Come this way, and I’ll tell you something,” Sissy cried, taking my hand, and leading me to a short distance. “I must whisper it in your ear, for no one must hear it — least of all, that tall mans yonder, who is watching us. What do you think the plack gipsy oomans told me? She said I should play my huspants false — and when he found me out he would kill me — and they would hang him for the plootty teet. So you see I must never marry. — Who is that tall mans, sir?” she continued, with a terrified look; “and why

does he stare at me so? He frightens me. I've treamt of somebody like him."

"Are you sure you have only dreamed of him, Sissy? Perhaps you have seen him before. Think!"

"No, it was only a tream," she answered, after a pause, during which she vainly essayed to collect her scattered wits — "but I *did* tream that a man like him was my huspants. But he won't kill me because I treamt so, will he?"

"Make yourself easy, Sissy. Husband or not, the good fellow will never harm you. He forgives you."

"Forgives me — what for? What harm have I done him? Ask him to tell you."

"Why not ask him yourself, Sissy?"

"Because I am afraid of him," she replied, shuddering. "He means me mischief. I know he does. I can read it in his eyes."

"Come! you must shake off these groundless fears, Sissy. Let me call him to you. Ned!"

Thus summoned, the poor fellow sprang towards her instantly, but the sight of her distress arrested him.

"Oh! no; do not let him come near me!" she exclaimed, clinging to me with affright. "He will be the death of me — I know he will. Keep him off! — keep him off!"

I was obliged to motion Ned away, and he withdrew to a bank and sat down upon it, evidently very painfully affected.

John Brideoake and the little girl now joined us, and engaging Sissy in conversation, she soon regained her serenity, and at little Grace's request, sang me one of her native airs with so much sweetness and pathos, that I could not refuse it the tribute of my tears.

While poor Sissy was warbling her touching strains, Dame Mavis came into the orchard, and taking John Brideoake

aside, said a few words to him which seemed to cause him infinite surprise. Signing to me that he would be back presently, he went away at once with Dame Mavis. Her song concluded, Sissy dropped me a curtsey, and taking little Grace's hand, walked with her towards the further end of the orchard, where they were hidden by the trees. Being thus in a measure left alone — for poor Ned still remained seated on the bank, with his face buried in his hands, and his faithful Hubert crouched at his feet — I walked down to the edge of the pool, and stood for a few minutes contemplating the beautiful scenery of the glen. All at once, I perceived a chariot about half a mile off coming rapidly along the road which Ned and I had just traversed. While watching the progress of this vehicle, and wondering whether it could be coming to the mill, I heard footsteps behind me, and turning, I almost started back with astonishment and delight on beholding Apphia coming towards me with John. She was in a riding-habit, and had evidently just dismounted from her horse. I bounded towards her with rapture; but my transports were instantly checked by the profound gloom of her looks — a gloom that was shared by her brother. Though kindly in her greeting, her manner towards me was constrained and cold.

“It is strange that we should meet here, Mervyn, in this unexpected manner,” she said, “and at a juncture which may affect all my future life. Knowing how I am circumstanced, you will not be surprised to learn that I have come to claim my brother's protection. Ever since your visit to the Anchorite's, I have felt that I could not fulfil my contract with Malpas, but I lacked the courage to break it. Yesterday decided me. I came with my mother to the vicarage at Marston to spend a few days with the family with whom I was to be connected, and some circumstances occurred last

evening — not worth detailing now — but which made me resolve to emancipate myself at once from a thralldom which I found insupportable. To accomplish my design, I was obliged to have recourse to artifice — excusable, I trust, under the circumstances — and I solicited my mother's permission to ride over to Weverham this morning to see John — stipulating that I should only be attended by Dr. Sale's groom, and not accompanied by Malpas. Her consent was rather reluctantly given, but she at last yielded to my importunities. Before leaving, I entrusted a letter to one of the servants — to be delivered an hour after my departure — in which I acquainted my mother with my determination. On arriving at John's cottage, I learnt, to my great disappointment, that he was not within — but ascertaining that he was at the mill, I rode hither at once. All uneasiness is dissipated, since I have found him."

"But you are pursued!" I cried, pointing to the road on the further side of the mill-pool. "Yonder is Dr. Sale's carriage. No doubt your mother has likewise been to John's cottage, and has traced you here."

"Let her come. I will not return with her, unless John means to give me up."

"I will afford you an asylum," John replied; "but who shall say, in my infirm state of health, how long I may be able to offer it you?"

"Cannot I help you, Apphia?" I exclaimed. "You might give me rights, even more sacred than those of a brother, to aid you and protect you."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Mervyn, for your devotion," she replied. "But, alas! I cannot profit by it. I have given a promise — a solemn promise to my mother — never to bestow my hand upon any one without her consent

— and I am well assured she will never consent to my union with you.”

“I had not foreseen this,” John said, mournfully. “A hope was springing in my breast that I might see you both happy — but you have wholly crushed it, Apphia. I lament that you have uttered this rash promise — but having given it, you must, perforce, keep it.”

“I do not think so,” I rejoined, warmly. “Such a promise ought not to be exacted by a parent, and can never be binding on a child.”

“If the child voluntarily chooses to place such an obligation upon her conscience, she must abide by it,” John rejoined. “Apphia cannot be released, except by her mother.”

“You are right, John,” she replied. “I fear there will always be an insuperable bar between me and Mervyn. I must therefore look to you — and to you alone. And yet, perhaps, I ought not to place you in this position. You will have lasting differences with our mother, on my account.”

“Do not consider me, Apphia,” he said. “I would not offend our mother if I could help it — and I will strive to reason with her now. Failing my endeavours in this respect, my home is your home.”

“I thank you, John,” she replied, earnestly.

“Your decision is only just made in time,” I cried, “for here comes Mrs. Brideoake.”

As I spoke, the carriage drove up to the little bridge near the mill. A footman immediately came down from the box, crossed the bridge, and returned the next moment with Mavis, who, doffing his cap, evidently told the occupants of the carriage that the persons they sought were there. On receiving this information, the steps were instantly lowered, and Malpas Sale and Mrs. Brideoake alighting, proceeded towards the mill.

“We will await their coming here, Apphia,” John said to his sister. “You had better withdraw, Mervyn, for your presence might tend to complicate matters. Retire behind those palings,” he added, pointing to the palisades of a gardener’s shed. “You will then hear all that passes. I desire to have you for a witness. Should I need you, I will call you. Take Ned Culcheth with you. He would be in the way.”

Feeling that no time must be lost, I ran towards Ned, and rousing him as well as I could from the state of apathy into which he had sunk, I half dragged him behind the palings which John had indicated, and which completely screened us from view.

We had only just gained this retreat, when I heard voices, and placing myself in a position that enabled me to see without being seen, I beheld Mrs. Brideoake, attended by Malpas, approach her son and daughter. John made a respectful salutation to his mother as she approached, taking off his hat as she drew near, and remaining uncovered during the whole of his interview with her. On her part, she treated him with the utmost coldness — did not shake hands with him — but eyed him with severe displeasure. As to Malpas and John they might have been utter strangers to each other, so distant was the manner in which their salutations were made.

Apphia took refuge behind her brother, and remained with her eyes fixed upon the ground.

“You are aware what brings me here, John,” Mrs. Brideoake began, in a dictatorial tone, and as if determined to enforce obedience to her commands. “Apphia has left me in an extraordinary manner, and I am sure you will see the propriety of her immediate return to her duty.”

“Apphia has fully explained her sentiments to me,” John replied, in tones the gentleness of which contrasted strongly with his mother’s haughty accents, “and I can therefore

“speak for her. She is quite willing to return to you, and to obey your behests as heretofore —”

“I am glad of it,” Mrs. Brideoake interrupted. “No more need be said, then.”

“Pardon me, mother, much remains to be said. That you desire my sister’s happiness and worldly prosperity I do not doubt, and that in choosing a husband for her, you have chosen one who, in your own opinion, justifies your selection, I am ready to grant. But the heart cannot be controlled, and Apphia feels that to marry without love — in her case, at least — would be to marry to certain misery. She therefore — through me — beseeches you not to seek to force her inclinations, but to leave her the free exercise of her will; and on this understanding she will willingly, cheerfully return to you. I also join my earnest entreaties to hers that you will accede to her request.”

No supplication could be more gently, more respectfully preferred. But John’s humility served only to heighten his mother’s imperiousness of manner.

“I can make no terms with a disobedient child,” she said. “I order Apphia to return to me. She will disobey at her peril.”

“A word more, mother,” John urged, in the same respectful manner as before. “Apphia is most unwilling to resist your mandates — believe me when I say it. Surely, surely, after what I have stated, you cannot wish to doom her to unhappiness? Neither after what he has heard, can the gentleman to whom she is affianced desire fulfilment of the contract.”

“Since I am appealed to,” Malpas said, “I must answer that I have placed myself entirely in Mrs. Brideoake’s hands. I am naturally unwilling to surrender one to whom I am devotedly attached — and I shall not of my own accord break

the contract I have entered into. But if Mrs. Brideoake desires it, I will forego all claim to her daughter's hand. Not otherwise. Indeed, I am at a loss to understand the meaning of this sudden change in Apphia's feelings towards me. She entered into this engagement deliberately — and as far as I am able to judge, voluntarily — but within the last week her sentiments seem totally altered, and she appears to regard me with aversion."

"The cause of the change is easily explained," Mrs. Brideoake said. "It is because by the return of Mervyn Clitheroe a foolish attachment, which she indulged in as a child, has been revived in her breast. But," she added, sternly, addressing Apphia, "let her mark me well, if she thwarts my inclinations, she may rest assured that, under no circumstances, and on no pretence, will I consent to her marriage with the object of her fancied regard. And you, John," she continued, turning to him, "who argue for her, let me point out to you the mischief you are doing, by combining with your undutiful sister against me. It is your fault if I am compelled to mention matters without due regard to delicacy. Listen to me with attention, and you will see how little of a brother's regard for a sister's welfare there is in your opposition to me. My dear friend, Mrs. Mervyn," she continued, slowly and emphatically, "has executed a deed, by which she settles one half of her large property — and a large property it is, being upwards of 4000*l.* a year — upon Apphia — on her marriage."

"On her marriage with Malpas Sale — and no other?" John asked, quickly.

"On her marriage with Malpas Sale, and no other," Mrs. Brideoake repeated, deliberately. "Malpas is the person specified in the settlement, which would become null and void in the event of Apphia's union with — say Mervyn Cli-

theroe. The marriage is appointed for Malpas's next birthday, when he will be twenty-five, and will consequently attain his majority, according to the terms of his uncle Moberley's will. At the same time, he will come into 2000*l.* a year — so that the fortunes of bride and bridegroom will be fairly balanced."

"Having heard this statement, which I can confirm," Malpas said, "Mr. Brideoake will no doubt give it due consideration."

"It merits consideration, indeed," John replied, after a moment's pause. "You had better take time for reflection, Apphia."

"I require none," his sister replied, firmly. "I decide at once. No pecuniary consideration shall induce me to enter into this marriage, and I am sure it was not with any design of forcing my inclinations, that kind, excellent Mrs. Mervyn acted thus generously towards me. Having no claim upon her bounty — no expectations from her — I do not now feel disappointed; but I am not less grateful for her kindness, though I cannot accept the gift with its conditions."

"And this is your decision, Apphia?" her mother cried, severely. "You had better pursue the course recommended you by your brother, and reflect. Bear in mind that you will not only forfeit this large property — but my love and protection — my love and protection," she sternly repeated.

"I cannot help it, mother," Apphia answered, meekly. "I shall strive to bear your displeasure, hoping that time may soften it."

"Be not mistaken — time will never soften it," Mrs. Brideoake cried, furiously. "Have I reared you — have I toiled for you — have I paved your way to fortune — ungrateful, disobedient child, only to find you turn upon me thus? But

tremble! Your ingratitude and disobedience warrant me in invoking condign punishment upon your head."

And as she spoke she raised her arm, as if about to pronounce a malediction. Affrighted at the gesture, Apphia flung herself at her feet, and clasped her knees.

But Mrs. Brideoake was held in check by one who had never before asserted supremacy over her. For the first time in his life her son turned a menacing and indignant look upon her, and she gazed upon him, as all who beheld him did, in astonishment and awe.

John seemed endowed with superhuman power, and drawing up his tall figure to its full height, he regarded his mother with eyes that flashed with lightning.

"Forbear, mother!" he exclaimed, stretching out his hand towards her. "In my sacred character, which you are bound to respect, I command you to desist! You have no just cause of offence against your daughter. She has ever been dutiful towards you, and if she now rebels against your authority, it is because you exact too much. Heaven has not ears for invocations like yours, and if you call down curses upon your child, be assured they will recoil on your own head. Rise up, Apphia, rise up, and come to me. I have made every effort to soften our mother's obdurate heart; but in vain. She casts you off, my poor child. Be it so. I receive you. If there should be remorse and repentance for this day's unhappy proceedings, they will not rest with us."

Mrs. Brideoake, who had appeared quite confounded by her son's address, now made an effort to retrieve the ground she had lost.

"John, John — you ought not to take part with her, but with me," she cried. "You share her disobedience."

"Peace! mother, and let us part," John replied. "I will never reproach you, though when you think of me hereafter,

you may sometimes reproach yourself. Neither, I am sure, will Apphia reproach you, even if you refuse to make her happy by assenting to her union with the only man she can love. I would that we might part with you in a better frame of mind, and that you would leave your blessing with us."

"My blessing — never! ungrateful as you both are," she rejoined, with asperity. "You will both repent this step — bitterly repent it."

"It is to be hoped, for your own sake, that you may repent it, mother," John replied.

Mrs. Brideoake made a movement, as if to quit the spot.

"Nay, tarry a moment, my dear Mrs. Brideoake," Malpas said. "Let us have something like an amicable understanding if we can, ere we separate. I will not further press the fulfilment of the contract between myself and Apphia, but as she has alleged no stronger reason than change of mind for the avoidance of her solemn engagement, I will still venture to hope that, ere long, another change may occur, and I may be reinstated in her good opinion, which, for no fault of my own that I can discern, I appear to have forfeited. All I will beg, therefore, is to be permitted to visit her as a friend, and I will undertake not to renew my proposition unless it shall be agreeable to herself."

"The proposal appears reasonable," John rejoined. "What answer do you make, Apphia?"

But before she could reply, a soft and plaintive voice was heard singing a Welsh song, and little Grace and her companion were seen advancing along a path that led towards the party.

"It is Sissy Culcheth! — I am sure it is!" Apphia exclaimed.

As she spoke the song ceased, for poor Sissy, perceiving

the party, hurried towards them. Her lap was full of wild-flowers, and she offered a branch of honeysuckle to Apphia.

I had kept my eye on Malpas. When the voice of the poor singer was heard he became pale as death, trembled, and would no doubt have taken to flight, if he could have framed a plausible excuse for his sudden departure. But when Sissy came up, he found his position intolerable, and was moving off; when John Brideoake caught hold of his arm, and detained him.

"Stay a moment, sir," John cried, sternly. "I am compelled to put some interrogations to you. You have just stated that my sister can allege no stronger reason for refusing to fulfil her contract with you, than change of mind. A plea seems now to be furnished her, which, if correct, cannot be resisted. A charge of the gravest character has been brought against you in reference to this distracted woman. Can you look the poor creature in the face, and declare solemnly, and as you will render a final account of your actions to Heaven, that you are not the cause of her present lamentable condition?"

"I trust not," Malpas replied, shuddering and averting his head.

"Look at her, I say," John continued, "and do not equivocate in your answer. Did you, or did you not, lure her from her husband's home?"

"These questions are only put to me for the purpose of enabling Apphia to break her engagement with me," Malpas said, trying to feign indignation, though his faltering tones showed how differently he was affected, "and they do not deserve to be answered. Enough for me to declare at once that all such assertions respecting me, by whomsoever made, are false and calumnious. The person with whom this unhappy woman left her home is Simon Pownall."

"If so, you cannot object to an ordeal which I will propose, with a view to test your innocence?" John said.

"What ordeal do you mean?" Malpas asked, in faltering tones.

"You shall see," John replied. "Here, Sissy," he cried, taking the hand of the poor creature, who was busily engaged in picking out a sprig of blooming eglantine from her bundle of flowers, "come this way. An old acquaintance wishes to see you. Look at him. Do you not know him — Mr. Malpas Sale?"

Poor Sissy, at first, had not heeded what was said to her, but continued to pursue her occupation. On hearing the name, however, which John repeated more than once, with marked and peculiar emphasis, she looked up, and fixing her eyes on Malpas, a fearful change came suddenly over her countenance.

"It is he! it is he!" she shrieked. "It is the pad man of my dreams. It is he who is to take me from my huspants, and cause my death!"

Then, uttering a piercing scream, and placing her hands before her eyes as if to exclude some dreadful vision, she would have sunk to the ground, if Apphia had not supported her.

On hearing this cry, Ned, who had with difficulty restrained himself, rushed forth, and I followed him, for I feared from the expression of his countenance that he might do some desperate act.

Malpas seemed as if he would have gladly sunk into the earth when the vengeful husband stood before him.

"Look at me," Ned vociferated — "look at me, thou black-hearted, shaking villain. Dost know me? Dost know me, I say?"

Malpas made no answer, but turned to fly.

But the grasp of a giant was laid upon him. Seizing him

by the shoulder, Ned plucked him round as easily as if he had been a child. They were again face to face.

"Well, what do you want with me?" Malpas faltered.

"Satisfaction! — that's what I want," Ned thundered — "satisfaction for the wrongs done me. And by the Heaven above us! I'll have it."

"What do you want satisfaction for, my good fellow?" Malpas said, trying to appease him. "I've done you no harm."

"Thou liest!" Ned cried. "Thou hast done me a wrong which nothing but blood can wipe out — and thy blood I'll have. I have tarried thus long for vengeance because I doubted thy guilt, but her cries have accused thee. Prepare thyself if thou canst — thy hour is come."

"Hear me, Ned," Malpas cried, seriously alarmed by the other's infuriated aspect. "I swear to you that I have not injured you as you suppose."

"Oaths like thine won't weigh with me," Ned cried. "Thy victim there gives thee the lie. Look at the wreck thou hast made, and ask thyself if I am likely to spare thee."

"This madman will do Mr. Sale a mischief," Mrs. Brideoake said. "Will nobody fly for assistance? Nay, then, I must go myself. There will be murder done. Help! help!"

And she ran screaming towards the mill.

"Come, Ned," I cried, "I feel for you deeply, as you know, but I cannot stand by and see outrage done."

"What! you, too, take his part, sir, eh?" Ned roared, blinded by fury. "I didn't expect it. But neither you nor Mr. Brideoake shall baulk my vengeance. Hubert will keep you both off. Tent 'em, lad! — tent 'em!"

And the fierce hound instantly displayed his glistening fangs, and seemed ready to spring at us.

"Now stand upon thy defence and we will fight, as man with man," Ned cried, releasing Malpas.

"No; I won't fight you, Ned," Malpas replied. "I'm no match for you."

"Thou thought'st thyself more than a match for me wi' yon poor fool, thou dastardly villain," Ned rejoined, with scornful fury. "But if thou won't fight, down on thy knees, confess thy guilt, and sue for mercy."

At this moment shouts were heard, and several persons were seen hurrying towards us from the mill.

"Sue for mercy to you, fellow — never!" Malpas cried, reassured by the sound.

But the words were scarcely out of his mouth when a tremendous blow in the face from Ned's clenched hand levelled him, bleeding, upon the ground. The enraged keeper knelt upon his prostrate body, and seizing him by the throat, would infallibly have strangled him, if I had not, at great personal hazard, come to the rescue. Aided by John Brideoake, who prevented Hubert from attacking me, I succeeded in compelling Ned to relinquish his death-gripe of Malpas. In another moment, Mavis, with three of his men, reached the scene of strife.

Mrs. Brideoake tried hard to have Ned seized, charging him with a murderous attack upon Malpas; but as soon as Mavis learnt from John Brideoake and myself how matters really stood, the worthy miller would not allow Ned to be touched — declaring that, under similar provocation, he should have acted in the same manner.

While Malpas, quite insensible from the crushing blow — enough to stun an ox — which he had received, was carried to the mill, Ned devoted himself to his wife, and, as she no longer repelled his advances, he pressed her to his bosom, and covered her with kisses. Poor Sissy appeared, in some

degree, to have regained her faculties, for she murmured, as her husband strained her fondly to his breast, "If you mean to kill me, Ned, do it now."

"Kill thee, dear lass!" he exclaimed. "If I do kill thee, it shall be wi' kindness. I have got thee back at last, and nought shall part us more."

"And, Ned! — dear Ned!" she cried, "I have been foolish, and greatly to blame, but I am innocent — on my faith I am. Forgive me — oh, forgive me!"

"I forgive thee, dear, from the bottom of my heart," he replied; "and I fully believe what thou dost tell me. Oh! what a load is taken from my breast!"

Sissy gazed at him for a moment with inexpressible gratitude and affection, and flung her arms about his neck. They remained locked in each other's embrace for a few moments, when Sissy's hold relaxed, and she swooned away. The revulsion of feeling had been too much for her.

Ned bore her gently towards the mill, and we followed, in silence and in tears. While witnessing such a touching scene as was exhibited in the reconciliation of this poor couple, it was impossible to utter a word.

Mrs. Brideoake was already gone. She had left when Malpas was removed, without vouchsafing a word to either of her children.

BOOK THE THIRD.

CHAPTER I.

How the two Wizards of Owlarton Grange raised a Spirit which they did not expect.

ABOUT two months must be allowed to elapse ere I resume my narrative. No events of any importance had occurred to me during this interval. My affairs were pretty nearly in the same unsettled state as heretofore, and there seemed no immediate prospect of their amendment. I had made more than one unsuccessful attempt to obtain an interview with Mrs. Mervyn; and I had reason to believe that the letters which I addressed to her were never permitted to reach her — at all events, they were never answered. Neither Mr. Comberbach nor Molly Bailey, though both well enough disposed towards me, were able to lend me aid. Mrs. Brideoake still reigned supreme at the Anchorite's. As I was given to understand, she accounted for her daughter's absence by saying that Apphia was obliged to remain with her brother, whose feeble state of health required constant attendance, and, as no contradiction was given to the statement, Mrs. Mervyn probably believed it. But the poor lady — now almost entirely confined to her room — mourned for her absent favourite, and sighed for her return.

Malpas Sale had not been to the Anchorite's since his misadventure at the mill. Besides producing insensibility for several hours, the violent blow dealt by Ned's huge fist disfigured his features, and he was too personally vain to exhibit himself in public until his good looks were completely restored. By this time his leave of absence had expired, and he was obliged to join his regiment, which was stationed at Windsor. Before departing, he made an effort to obtain an interview with Apphia, but she declined to see him. He had previously written to her, professing undying love, and hoping still to be reinstated in her affections. Moreover, he utterly denied the accusations brought against him by Ned Culcheth, and solemnly protested that he had not seen Sissy from the time of her quitting her husband's roof until the luckless day at the mill.

This latter assertion, John Brideoake, who answered the letter for his sister, showed to be an evasion of the truth. It was now known, John said, by Sissy's confession, that Simon Pownall had been a mere instrument in the base plot, and Sissy was only saved from actual guilt by the agonies of suddenly awakened conscience, which had thrown her into a fever, and for a while, as Malpas knew, had disturbed her intellects. John concluded his letter by saying that his sister must decline to hold any further intercourse with Mr. Sale.

To this communication Malpas sent a haughty rejoinder from Windsor—to the effect that “he should formally demand fulfilment of his marriage contract with Apphia at the time appointed; and as he had her mother's support, it would then be seen whether his just claim could be resisted.” Here the correspondence ended.

Quitting Malpas, whom it is small pleasure for me at any time to mention, let me say that John's cottage — always

delightful — was rendered doubly so by its new inmate. His roses seemed to gain in beauty and fragrance from her sedulous attention. And John's powers of serving his parishioners were materially increased by his sister's zeal and unremitting exertions. Much as the young curate was beloved, his sister bade fair to eclipse him in general regard. One result followed Apphia's installation in her brother's abode, which, if there had been no other reason for it, would have made her advent fortunate. John's health improved — slightly, it is true; but improve it did. Whether he had less upon his mind — whether her presence cheered him — or that she took such good care of him — certain it is that the progress of disease was arrested, and confident hopes began to be entertained of his ultimate recovery. Moreover, John was hopeful about himself, and that was a good sign. If careful nursing could accomplish a cure, it must be owned that he had an excellent chance. Not only had he his sister to watch over him, but he had frequent visits from the ladies of Owlarton Grange. Scarcely a day passed on which Miss Hazilrigge and Ora failed to drive over to Weverham, bringing with them all sorts of nourishing things for the invalid.

Apphia and Ora took a liking to each other at once, and mutual regard soon ripened into warmest friendship. If good, kind Miss Hazilrigge, who was little behind her niece in regard for Apphia, could have had her own way, she would have had both John and his sister to stay with her at the Grange; but as this could not be, she contented herself with passing as much time as possible in their society. What degree of encouragement John had received from Ora, and whether there had been any "love passages" between them, I shall not at this moment pause to inquire. As regards myself and Apphia, I would be more explicit, but unluckily I have nothing to relate. Apphia treated me as a friend — nothing more. I was

free to come and go to John's cottage as I pleased, and was always kindly welcomed by herself and brother. But I was given clearly to understand by the young lady that I must not assume the character of a suitor; and whatever constraint I was obliged to put upon myself, in order to comply, I never sought to violate her injunctions.

Thus matters stood with my friends at Weverham.

As at John's cottage, so at Owlarton Grange, I was always welcome. Old Hazy would have had me consider his house as my home — and Miss Hazilrigge insisted upon my taking her brother at his word. Cuthbert Spring had long since returned to Cottonborough — though he now and then came over to spend a day at the Grange. Whether any positive matrimonial engagement had been entered into between him and the elderly spinster, I am not prepared to say. No such announcement had been made; and Miss Hazilrigge was still Miss Hazilrigge.

Charmed with the beautiful situation of the mill, and liking both Dame Mavis and her husband, I took up my abode with them. My new quarters suited me extremely well, and enabled me to enjoy the society of my friends, both at Owlarton Grange and Weverham. I bought a serviceable horse from the miller, and rode about in every direction throughout the county — visiting some new scene on nearly every day. A couple of months thus passed by almost without my being aware of their flight. If not entirely happy, I was content. A more active life might have suited me better, but I felt that a time would come when I should have work enough — and I determined to enjoy my present holidays.

What had become of the learned Doctor Hooker since his disappearance from the old Grange, on the night when he played the ghost, I could not ascertain. Old Hazy did not like to be questioned about him, and took it in such high dudgeon if I

ventured to disparage the professor of occult philosophy in his hearing, that at last I ceased to allude to him. But I did not intend to let the rascal escape altogether.

Peace had once more returned to Ned Culcheth's humble dwelling. Sissy had sufficiently recovered to be able to attend to her household concerns, and strove to repay by duty and affection her husband's deep devotion to her. No more coquetry — no more frivolity now. She had received a severe lesson, and meant to profit by it for the rest of her life.

With this brief reference to most of the reader's acquaintances, I shall resume my story.

I had ridden over to Marston, in order to have a day's fishing in the mere — according to previous arrangement with Ned Culcheth. Very good sport we had, and caught a couple of jack, besides a basketful of perch and other fish. With this supply we returned to Ned's cottage, where some of the perch were fried for me by Sissy — constituting, with a roast fowl and a few rashers of bacon, a most excellent repast.

The shades of night had fallen when I rose to take leave of my humble but hospitable entertainers. I had left my horse at the Nag's Head in the village, and Ned offered to row me across the mere and land me at the foot of the church, which would save me a mile's walk; besides, as the night was extremely fine, with bright moonlight on the water, he thought I should prefer that plan. I gladly accepted the proposal. Nothing could be more exquisite than the appearance of the mere as our little bark clove through its shining waters. In front of us was the old church amidst its trees — its square tower illumined by the silvery radiance. Leaning back in the boat, I did not address a word to Ned, who plied his oars in silence. In spite of the beauty and tranquillity of the scene, melancholy feelings stole over me. I thought of the dead —

and of one who was as if dead to me: of my mother in her grave in the adjacent churchyard, and of my father, whom I had never seen, in India. Pensive musings like these engrossed me, until the boat reached the strand, when I leaped ashore, and taking leave of Ned, climbed the hill, and entering the precincts of the church, proceeded towards my mother's grave. The white head-stones, the grassy mounds, the humble wooden rails, and the more imposing monuments, were all bathed in bright moonlight. Amidst them, an old black yew-tree, with outstretched boughs, had a spectral effect. I was just turning the angle of the church, when, to my surprise, I perceived a tall man wrapped in a cloak standing near my mother's resting-place. I could not be mistaken, for I knew the exact situation of the grave, and as the moonlight fell full upon the flat stone, I could almost read its inscription from where I stood. The person I beheld was extremely erect in deportment, and had a military carriage. His cap was removed, and I saw that he was grey-haired and partially bald, with a towering forehead, but his features being in the shade, I could not clearly distinguish them. So far, however, as they were discernible, they were entirely strange to me. Yet, somehow, I felt that I ought to know him. Who was he? Why should he visit my mother's grave at such an hour? Why display such emotion?

My curiosity being greatly aroused, I stood still to gaze at him. Indeed, I did not like to disturb him, so impressed was I by his appearance and manner.

More than once I saw his lips move as if in prayer. After heaving many deep sighs, and beating his breast, he put on his cap, and thinking he was about to depart, I resolved to address him; but not wishing to take him by surprise, I coughed slightly to announce my approach. He no sooner noticed me than he hurried out of the churchyard, and I

watched his tall dark figure, speeding rapidly across the field, until it disappeared from my sight. I felt half disposed to follow him. Yet, to what end? He evidently shunned observation. Wherefore should I intrude upon his grief?

I did not tarry much longer in the churchyard. Kneeling beside my mother's grave, I breathed a hasty prayer, and then proceeded to the village inn, where my horse being in readiness, I mounted him and rode off in the direction of Weverham.

I had fourteen miles to traverse, but what was such a distance as that with a fleet horse on a fine night? A mere question of an hour and a quarter. Besides, being now well acquainted with the country, I knew how to save a mile or two by taking cross-roads.

The shortest way to Weverham led past Owlarton Grange, and that road I now selected. But the shortest way is said to be sometimes the longest about; and I discovered the truth of that proverb ere long.

All went well till I got within a couple of miles of the Grange, when, from some cause or other, my horse fell dead lame. I was obliged to get off and lead him, but the poor animal could hardly hobble after me. What to do with him I scarcely knew, for to take him on to the mill, which was more than four miles off, seemed impossible. My best plan seemed to leave him at the Grange, where I could at all events place him in a shed till the morning. To the Grange accordingly I proceeded, but the horse moved so slowly that midnight had struck before I arrived there.

Being now well acquainted with the premises, I went round to the back, and, opening a gate, soon made my way into the farm-yard. Luckily the door of a cow-house was unfastened, and entering it, I placed my unlucky steed amongst the cattle, took off his saddle and bridle, tossed him a truss of

hay, and after making him as comfortable as circumstances would admit, sallied forth with the intention of knocking up Stephen Blackden or one of his hinds.

But my purpose was suddenly changed, for just as I regained the yard, the door of the farm-house was cautiously opened, and two persons issued from it, enveloped in long cloaks, with hats pulled over their brows, and so muffled up that it was impossible to distinguish their features. Notwithstanding this evident attempt at disguise, I felt certain that the pair were no other than Old Hazy and Simon Pownall; and I resolved to watch their movements. After pausing for a moment, to secure the door, they moved off towards the garden, and I stole after them.

On entering the garden the two mysterious individuals plunged into a long alley, formed of clipped yew-trees, leading in the direction of the summer-house. I followed, taking care to keep out of sight. The alley once gained, indeed, I was tolerably secure from observation, for it was so dark, owing to the height and thickness of its hedges, that I could scarcely discern the two figures moving on before me.

Arrived at an archway, however, the pair turned off, and when I next beheld them, they were standing together in a retired corner of the lawn. From the preparations they were now making, it was evident that some mysterious rites were about to be enacted. The large white sheet stamped with magical characters, which I had seen, on a previous occasion, in Simon Pownall's room, was spread upon the lawn, and they both seemed occupied in studying its cabalistic signs.

The spot selected for the ceremonial seemed suitable enough. It was a part of the lawn furthest removed from the hall, and screened by a group of shorn trees, which, by a little stretch of imagination, might be taken for men and animals suddenly transformed by the power of enchantment. On

the right was a gigantic bear reared on its hind legs, and with outstretched paws prepared to close with a huntsman, who was attacking it with an axe. Behind was a gigantic figure, with a long beard, probably meant to represent a Druid. Then came an evil angel with wide, outspread wings. Then a grotesque figure. Then a Faun playing Pandean pipes, with goats skipping before him; and lastly, a cock crowing on a tree.

Surrounded by these mute witnesses of their doings, the mysterious pair proceeded with their performance. The chief wizard, whom I took to be Simon, produced a wallet from under his cloak, and brought out a human skull and cross bones, the dried skins of toads, lizards, adders, and other reptiles, and disposed them in a circle round the cloth. While he was thus employed, the second wizard produced a little iron trivet with some combustibles; and these he placed outside the mystic ring.

The pair of conjurors then marched thrice round the magic circle, and seemed from their gestures to be muttering spells. This done, they paused, and the second wizard, whom I took for Old Hazy, brought forth a large book bound in black parchment, which I at once recognised as the grimoire he had shown to me in his sanctum.

Opening this magical volume, he pronounced some strange sounding words from it, which might be intended as an incantation, while his companion stepped into the magic circle, and began to trace certain lines upon it with the points of his fingers.

By this time my patience having become exhausted, I determined to put an end to the scene. When, therefore, the second wizard summoned some spirit, with a tremendous name, to appear, I did not wait for the response, but rushing forward, and shouting out, "You have raised a spirit you did

not expect!" I snatched the grimoire from his hands, and with the ponderous volume buffeted his companion soundly on the head and shoulders.

In doing so, however, I knocked off the individual's hat, when to my great surprise and vexation I found it was Old Hazy himself whom I had thus maltreated. At the same time the old gentleman, who had been struck speechless with terror by my sudden appearance, found his voice, and implored me to desist.

Simon Pownall had not waited for me to find out my mistake, but took nimbly to his heels, flying in the direction of the summerhouse. Before, however, he could climb the mound on which it was situated, I was after him, when finding himself hard pressed, the wily fox changed his plan, and ran on till he reached the edge of the moat, into which he unhesitatingly plunged, and swam across to the further side.

I was debating whether to follow him, but by this time Old Hazy having come up, entreated me to let him go; and before I could disengage myself, Simon had disappeared — thus, for the second time, eluding me.

CHAPTER II.

Miss Hazilrigge takes me into her Confidence.

OLD HAZY took my unlucky attack upon him in very good part, but thought I had carried the joke a little too far. He never expected, he said, to be beaten about the head with his beloved grimoire. He accepted my apologies, promising to think no more about the matter, provided I undertook to keep strict silence as to the occurrence; not liking to be made a laughing-stock, as would certainly be the case if the circumstance became known.

Delighted to be let off so easily, I readily agreed to his terms, and we then proceeded to remove all traces of the magical ceremonial from the lawn. After gathering together the mysterious implements, the obnoxious grimoire included, we wrapped them up in the sheet, and carried the bundle between us to the farm-house, depositing it in the room formerly occupied by the soi-disant Dr. Hooker, which communicated, as I had supposed must be the case, by a small private door with the hall. Renewing my apologies to the worthy old gentleman for my maladroit behaviour, I then took leave, and proceeded on foot to the mill, where I arrived without further accident or adventure, at a somewhat late hour.

In a few days my horse having recovered from his lameness, which proved to have been caused by a badly-driven nail, I was able to resume my rides about the country. All my inquiries after Simon Pownall were ineffectual. I could not learn what had become of him after his flight from the garden. Though, of course, in compliance with Old Hazy's injunctions, I made no allusion whatever to Simon's clandes-

tine visit to the Grange, nor to the Der Freischütz scene in the garden, in which he had played the part of Caspar, I thought it right to acquaint Miss Hazilrigge with the rogue's real name and character. She manifested no surprise at the information, but expressed great concern that her brother should be so egregiously duped.

“But it has constantly been the case with him, I can assure you, dear Mr. Clitheroe,” she said. “He has been deluded by impostor after impostor for years; and if we get rid of this Dr. Hooker, or Pownall, or whatever his name may be, another cheat will take his place. Decided opposition won't do with my brother. He must be humoured to a certain extent. If thwarted entirely, he would become unmanageable. This you must have perceived is the course I adopt with him, and the course I prescribe to the servants, who are all ordered to indulge their master's whims and peculiarities. You will now understand whatever may have appeared strange in the conduct of Stephen Blackden, the bailiff, and his family. Stephen knows he would lose his place — and a very good place it is — if he didn't humour my brother, and put up with his odd ways, and so does Dame Blackden. So do the whole household, in fact. Ponder makes a complete study of his master's eccentricities, and understands precisely how to treat him. He knows ‘the exact length of his foot,’ as they say in these parts. But setting aside his fantasies, my brother is so good and kind a master, and so honourable and just in his dealings, that his servants and tenants all regard him and respect him, and though no doubt they occasionally practise upon his credulity, yet on the whole I have no reason to complain. However, a stop must, and *shall* be put to this knavish Pownall's proceedings, and I will take care he no longer infests the premises. Orders shall be given to Stephen Blackden to warn him off.”

"Better order Blackden to arrest him, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," I ventured to observe.

"No, I can't consent to that," she rejoined. "I don't choose to have my brother's weaknesses exposed and turned into ridicule, which must be the case if this charlatan is brought to justice. It will be best to get rid of him quietly. Ah! my poor dear brother!" Miss Hazilrigge ejaculated, with a sigh. "What a pity so much goodness as is to be found in his composition should be linked to so much folly. Half his absurdities, I believe, are traceable to the nonsensical stuff with which he crams his brain, and I have more than once resolved to make a grand clearance of his shelves, and commit all the abominable rubbish he has collected to the flames; just as the curate and the housekeeper burnt Don Quixote's books of chivalry. But I have been deterred by fear of the consequences. The proceeding might drive him distracted."

"Upon my word, I believe it would," I rejoined. "Mr. Hazilrigge would never recover the loss of his Frommannus, his Maldonatus, his Psellus, Remigius and Filesacus, and other writers on whom he sets such store. He loves them better than life."

"You are right, Mr. Clitheroe," she said. "It won't do to interfere with him. An oddity he is, and an oddity he must remain to the end of the chapter. His mania is incurable, and must be tolerated — 'tis well it's no worse. For my part, I dislike your great bookworms. They're good for little else than an arm-chair in a library with a huge folio before them. I sincerely hope you won't read too much, Mr. Clitheroe."

I replied that I did not think it very likely I should err in that respect.

"I'm glad to hear it," she rejoined. "But now, while we are on the subject of my poor dear brother and his eccentrici-

ties, I must make a confidant of you, Mr. Clitheroe, and explain how anxious — how inexpressibly anxious — I shall feel about him — if — if I am compelled to leave him. No, I don't think I ever *can* leave him," she added, applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

Not knowing to what extent her confidence might be given, I contented myself with inquiring whether she had any immediate idea of leaving her brother.

Her agitation increased as she attempted a response. At last she sobbed out, "It will be a dreadful struggle — a terrible sacrifice, Mr. Clitheroe — and I hope Mr. Spring won't exact it from me."

I am sorry to confess, that instead of being moved by this pathetic address, I felt very much inclined to smile; but I managed to preserve my gravity. Though not in entire possession of my friend's sentiments, I thought I might venture to speak for him.

"Mr. Spring, I am convinced, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," I said, "will consent to any arrangement most in accordance with your wishes and comforts."

"Then you think he will allow me to remain at Owlarton Grange — with my dear brother — do you, Mr. Clitheroe?" she cried, removing the handkerchief from her eyes, and gazing wistfully at me through her tears. "I fancied he was wedded to Cottonborough and the neighbourhood. Now, I have the greatest regard for Mr. Spring, and consider him a most charming person, but even *he* couldn't reconcile me to Cottonborough, or to the sort of society one must be compelled to mix with there. The mere idea of it makes me shudder."

"I have no authority for saying so, of course, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," I replied; "but I repeat my firm conviction that Mr. Spring will gladly accede to your wishes. Whatever

his own inclinations may be, your happiness must necessarily be his first study. Of that be assured. If a certain happy event — to which, I trust, I may without impropriety allude — should occur — I do not see why you should not continue to live here — always supposing the arrangement to be agreeable to Mr. Hazilrigge."

"Oh, there is no difficulty on my dear brother's part," she replied; "but Mr. Spring objects —"

"You don't say so?" I cried.

"Decidedly objects," Miss Hazilrigge continued. "He calls this place dull, and declares he should be moped to death if he dwelt here for a month. He doesn't care for hunting, shooting, fishing, or any other country sport. He doesn't like country employments. He doesn't like country gentlemen, or farmers — clodhoppers he calls them. In short, the only place he *does* like appears to be Cottonborough, and the only society he apparently cares for is the society of the Cottonburghers. I pity his taste in the latter particular, I must say. If Mr. Spring has no relish for our pleasant country, I can't abide his filthy town, with its tall, smoky chimneys and its squalid population, and so I have told him. To be frank with you, Mr. Clitheroe, we have joined issue on this point — Town or Country — Cottonborough or Owlarton Grange."

"Country will gain the day," I cried.

"I am not so sure of it," she replied. "Mr. Spring is very obstinate, and clings to Cottonborough as if nothing could tear him from it. But one thing I can promise him — either he must quit that odious, black, smoky place, or he shan't have me. I am not selfish, Mr. Clitheroe, but I am bound to consider my brother, and must not totally disregard my own comforts."

"Certainly not, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," I replied.

Our confidential discourse, which took place in Miss Hazil-

rigge's boudoir, was here cut short — rather to my relief, I must say — by the entrance of Ora, who, by an arch glance at me, intimated that she could guess what we had been talking about. Her aunt imposed silence upon me by a look, and of course I did not betray the trust reposed in me. But on thinking over what I had heard, I came to the conclusion that the match between the elderly couple was not quite so certain of coming off, as I had previously fancied.

Miss Hazilrigge was sincerely attached to her brother, and I do not think she could have borne a separation from him. Now that it had come to the positive question of leaving Owlarton Grange, she evidently began to feel the strength of the ties that bound her to the place, and to its eccentric but estimable master, and shrank from breaking them. Old Hazy and she had lived together since their early years — how would they get on apart in their latter day? What would become of him when she was gone, and there was no one to take care of him? He would become a prey to every impostor. Would Cuthbert Spring and Cottonborough suffice for the loss of the dear old house, and the dearer old brother? Hardly. The chances seemed against the marriage, unless the perverse old bachelor would give up his residence in the smoky manufacturing town, which Miss Hazilrigge so much abominated, and consent to share the pure delights of the country with her and her brother. But Cuthbert was town-bred, and town-educated, and liked noise and bustle, the busy mart and the crowded street, the dingy warehouse and the stupendous mill, and it was just as difficult to tear him from Cottonborough, as to remove Miss Hazilrigge from the Grange.

Had the case been mine instead of Mr. Spring's, I should have declared for the country, without an instant's hesitation. Owlarton Grange was a delightful residence. Old Hazy was

somewhat of a bore, it is true, with his long stories and whimsies; but he had so many redeeming qualities, was so good-natured, so kind and considerate, that it was impossible for any one, much in his society, not to like him. I became very much attached to him; but though willing to listen to his long stories after dinner, over a bottle of claret, I took good care to keep out of his sanctum.

Being now perfectly at home at the Grange, I rambled about the house and garden as much as I listed. No one stood upon any ceremony with me, and I came to be regarded as one of the family by the household. A room was allotted to me in the great gallery, where I retired to read when I pleased, without fear of disturbance. The haunted chamber was always ready for me in case I chose to pass the night at the hall. But I rarely availed myself of the privilege, preferring my snug little bedroom at the mill.

Apropos of the haunted chamber, let me take this opportunity of mentioning that careful investigation of the room enabled me to detect a trap-door, very ingeniously contrived in the planks of the floor near the antique tester-bed. On opening this trap-door, a steep narrow staircase was discovered, on descending which, a long arched passage appeared, built in the inside of the foundation walls of the habitation. After tracking this passage, a second staircase was reached, similar to the first, which landed me, by means of a sliding panel at its summit, in a small room near to the extreme end of the great gallery. From this room, access could be gained through a private door to the farm-house.

The course taken by Pownall in his nocturnal visit to me was therefore revealed. At first I had supposed that the rascal had found his way to the priest's hiding-place, where the murderous deed was committed by Jotham Shocklach; but this proved not to be the case.

Since Pownall's disappearance from the farm-house, no more ghostly noises had been heard, and the awful rapping of the mallet entirely ceased. If things went on in this way, and no new prestigiator appeared on the scene, Old Hazy would lose his character for eccentricity, and Owlarton Grange become little better than an every-day habitation, remarkable only for its antiquity.

But it must not be imagined that the old gentleman neglected his beloved treatises on occult philosophy. On the contrary, he found greater solace in them than ever. Debarred from the society and counsel of the modern Thaumaturgus, as he styled the soi-disant Dr. Hooker, he held constant communion with the departed sages — with Zoroaster, Olaus Magnus, and John Adam Osiander — and if he heated his brain overmuch with their prodigious recitals, he, at all events, committed fewer extravagances.

And where was the bewitching Ora all this while? The bewitching Ora had her own pursuits — I had mine. We were the best friends possible, and if I had encouraged her, I have no doubt she would have been as confidential with me as her aunt had proved. But though we talked together with perfect freedom on most topics, we never renewed the conversation we had had in the garden relative to John Brideoake. Perhaps, she was quite satisfied now that John was in a fair way of regaining his health, and no longer felt any uneasiness about him. Perhaps, his sister was the depositary of her confidences, if she had any to impart. Perhaps, it was not necessary to speak of John at all, since she saw so much of him — rarely a day passing that she did not visit Weverham. Perhaps — but what need of further guessing? I consider it impertinent and unfair to pry into young ladies' secrets.

CHAPTER III.

Revelations.

WHEN not at Owlarton Grange, I was at Weverham; and when not at Weverham, I was at Owlarton Grange. My time was pretty equally divided between my friends. Naturally, the curate's humble dwelling possessed stronger attractions to me than the ancient hall, inasmuch as it contained Apphia; and if I had consulted my own inclinations I should never have been absent from her side. But this might not be; and I was forced to submit to a destiny which for the time seemed unpropitious to my happiness. More than once, when there appeared to be a possibility of my forgetting it, Apphia gently reminded me of the unfortunate promise she had given to her mother, and declaring that no entreaties of mine could cause her to break it, reduced me, in an instant, from a state of rapture to utter despair. Sometimes I thought her unnecessarily cold — and told her so — but I perceived from the expression of her countenance, as well as from the tears starting to her eyes, that my reproaches were unjust, and I hastened to recal them. That she acted from a sense of propriety I knew, and however I might suffer, I felt I had no right to complain.

What the solution of this painful question might be, I did not dare to conjecture. Time only could decide. But though cast down for the moment, I was not without hope for the future.

But I must now proceed to detail an adventure which befel me when returning one evening from a visit to Weverham;

and which furnished me, in a strange way, with some rather important information.

The day had been oppressively hot, and as the sun went down there was every appearance of a thunderstorm: heavy masses of leaden-coloured clouds, accompanied by portentous stillness and gloom. The shades of night brought no coolness. Scarce a breath of air was stirring. We sat with open windows, but found little relief, for the scent of the flowers from the garden was almost overpowering.

Still the storm held off, and I thought I should be able to reach the mill before it burst forth. John advised me to wait, and so did Apphia, who seemed more apprehensive of danger than her brother, but I would not listen to their entreaties, and set forth, laughingly assuring them that they need be under no apprehension about me.

Scarcely had I reached the garden-gate, when a flash of forked lightning traversing the sky seemed to rebuke my rashness; while, in another instant, an angry growl of thunder was heard in the distance. Apphia called out to me, imploring me to come back, but I did not heed her, and went on my way.

The mill was distant about two miles, and the nearest road lying across the fields, I took it of course, walking as fast as I could. But I had not proceeded more than a mile, when the storm broke upon me in all its fury. The rain came down like a waterspout, drenching me in an instant to the skin. Fire and water were commingled, for notwithstanding the deluging showers, the heavens appeared in a blaze. I have never beheld more vivid lightning, nor heard more awful claps of thunder. I should now have been glad to be back again with John and his sister, and regretted that I had turned a deaf ear to Apphia's urgent entreaties to me to stay.

But I could not but admit that I was rightly served for my imprudence.

The situation was extremely unpleasant. I was half-drowned, deafened, nearly blinded — wholly confused. I looked around for shelter — none was at hand — for I did not dare to place myself under a tree, knowing well the risk incurred in doing so from the electric fluid.

To turn back was as bad as to go on. So I pursued my course with as much expedition as circumstances would permit. Rapid progress, however, was now out of the question; and indeed it was with difficulty that I got on at all, for the paths were flooded and slippery, and the lightning so dazzling and incessant, that I could scarcely face it.

At length, after crossing a couple more fields, I came to a halt; beginning to fear that I must have got upon a wrong track. In another moment my doubts were converted into certainties. A flash of lightning of extraordinary brilliancy showed me that I was within thirty yards of the high road leading to Owlarton Grange. Instead of proceeding in the direction of the mill, I had therefore been walking away from it for the last quarter of an hour.

Rushing forward to a stile near the high road, I waited for the next flash, hoping it might reveal some dwelling where I might obtain shelter; but though disappointed in this expectation, I caught sight of something, which, under the circumstances, was nearly as welcome — namely, a haystack situated at the further end of the opposite field.

Congratulating myself on the discovery, I at once started towards this place of refuge, and quickly reached it. The haystack proved to be as large as a good-sized farm-house, with widely overhanging eaves and sides sloping down to a somewhat narrow base — promising comfortable shelter at the end not exposed to the weather. I was hastening thither,

when the sound of voices arrested me. Something seemed to whisper caution, and well it was that I attended to the monitor. In the intervals between the loud peals of thunder I could distinguish the voices of the speakers more clearly, and they seemed familiar to me, but in order to make sure, I peered cautiously round the corner, and a flash of lightning occurring at the moment, I beheld Simon Pownall conversing with Phaleg and Obed.

Simon seemed ill at ease, and either from fright, or owing to the blue glare of the lightning, looked perfectly livid. But his companions appeared wholly indifferent to the terrors of the storm which agitated him so violently. Reclining against the side of the stack with his brawny arms crossed upon his chest, and one muscular leg twined round the other, gipsy-fashion, Phaleg looked the picture of reckless unconcern; while his son leaned in an equally careless attitude against a donkey, which, with a pair of panniers and a bundle of stakes upon its back, formed a conspicuous feature in the group.

All this I noted at a glance; and I noted, moreover, with some uneasiness, that both gipsies carried their heavy bludgeons with them. It might be the effect of the lightning, as in Pownall's case, but I thought Phaleg's countenance wore an unusually sinister expression. The stack had been cut at this end in steps, and a good deal of loose hay lay scattered about, in the midst of which sat Pownall with his back partly towards me. A ladder reared against the side of the rick showed that the honest husbandman had been recently at work there, not calculating upon such visitants as these.

"Mercy on us!" Simon ejaculated, his teeth chattering with fright — "what an awful peal of thunder! I never recollect such a storm in all my born days. D'ye think we're safe here, my worthy Phaleg?"

"Safe! — ay, to be sure," the elder gipsy rejoined, in a scoffing voice; "just as safe as you'd be in a church — safer, mayhap — for I once seed the tower o' Lymme church struck by a thunderbowt, and some great heavy stones rolled down and broke through the roof, and would ha' killed a score o' godly folk, if they had chanced to be mumbling their prayers at the time."

And the miscreant chuckled at his own pleasantry.

"Don't laugh in that way, I beg of you, my irreverend Phaleg," Pownall rejoined. "It makes the flesh creep on my bones. Powers above! what a flash! — enough to put one's eyes out."

"What, you're afeared o' thunder an' lightnin', are ye?" the caitiff rejoined, scowling at the heavens. "Well, I ain't. I rayther enjoys a storm like this. I account it a pratty sight — a'most as good as fire-works. Some canting folks would fancy that the Dule and all his imps was abroad."

"Have done, Phaleg," Pownall cried, sharply. "This is not a proper season for jesting."

"Well, chant a psalm, if you're so inclined," the ruffian answered, contemptuously. "How long is it since you turned Methoddy parson, eh, Pownall? I thought you were still in the conjuring line."

"Don't be angry, my worthy Phaleg," the other rejoined; "I meant no offence. Let us proceed to business."

"Wi' a' my heart," the other replied. "Go on. I'll listen to you, provided the thunder'll let me."

"I wish I had as much courage as you, my brave Phaleg," Simon replied; "but this storm has robbed me of all mine."

"Robbed you, has it?" the gipsy cried, derisively. "I didn't fancy you had much courage to lose. But if you want to rouse your sperrits, why don't you take a drop o' brandy?"

"An excellent suggestion," Simon said. "Luckily I have

my pocket-flask with me. You know whose cellar the liquor comes from, Phaleg," he added, producing a small leather-covered flask, and unscrewing a silver cup from the top, which he proceeded to fill.

"Ay, ay, I know where you got it, and I know also that it be the right sort o' stuff," the gipsy replied. "I wish I were as well varsed i' the black art as you, Pownall. You plays hocuspocus tricks to some purpose."

"That's some of Old Hazy's best Nantz," Simon cried, tossing off the contents of the cup. "Taste it, Phaleg," he said, replenishing the little vessel, and handing it to him.

"I won't say 'No,'" the gipsy rejoined. "Here's success to us all three!" he added, emptying the cup. "A rare cordial, by my soul!" he cried, smacking his lips. "Obed won't object to a drop of it."

"That I won't, father," the younger gipsy replied, with a grin.

"Here you are, then, little Obed," Pownall said, giving him the cup, which he had once more filled to the brim. "Plague on't! how my hand shakes."

"Steady it wi' another cupful," Phaleg rejoined, with a gruff kind of facetiousness. And as Simon acted upon the hint, the gipsy added, "Now we can talk over matters comfortably."

"Ha! ha! so we can," Pownall laughed. "I don't care for the thunder now. It may roar till it's hoarse — ha! ha! And the lightning may burn itself out. But to business," he added, checking his hilarity on the sudden. "You and I are in the same boat, Phaleg, and must pull together, if we want to get along smoothly."

"Well, I'm willing," the elder gipsy said. "You've only to say which way we are to pull."

"Let me first explain how I'm situated," Pownall went on.

"The game at Owlarton Grange is up. I could have made a good harvest there, and stayed as long as I liked, if it hadn't been for that meddlesome fool, young Clitheroe."

"Curse him!" Phaleg ejaculated. "He'd better not come across me again. I'd split his skull for two pins."

"'Twas an unlucky day for me that brought him to the Grange," Simon continued, "for he has marred all my schemes. I tried to scare him off the premises by playing the ghost, but he was too wide awake to be so taken in, and I had enough to do to get away from him. T' other night, just as I had enticed Old Hazy into the garden, and was about to play off some conjuring tricks, for which the old fellow would have come down handsomely, my gentleman pops upon us un-awares, and not only deprives me of my fee, but forces me to swim across the moat in order to escape."

Simon's description of his misadventures seemed highly diverting to both gipsies, for they broke into a loud fit of laughter.

"I found it no joke, my lively friends, I can promise you," Simon continued, rather testily; "and I don't think that either of you would have liked it. This was my last appearance at the Grange. Old Hazy still sticks to me, and would have me back again if he dared; but owing to this confounded young Clitheroe's interference, Miss Hazilrigge and all the household are against me, and I daren't show my face. Before I bolted, I tried hard to get a good thumping sum out of the old squire, but it was no go. And this brings me to the point, my worthy Phaleg. Since money is not to be had there, it must be got elsewhere — d'ye understand?"

"I shall do so, I dare say, afore you've done," the elder gipsy rejoined.

"Briefly, then," Simon said, "if a certain friend of ours is

to come quietly into 2000*l.* a year in a few months' time, he must pay us for permission to obtain it."

"I am quite of your opinion, Mester Pownall," the elder gipsy replied. "If he axes my permission, he shan't have it, unless he *do* pay. But I thought you had got summut already from the young chap."

"So I have, but it's all spent. However, our secret ought to be a mine of wealth to us, Phaleg — a mine of wealth; and I'm content to share it with you, because —"

"You can't help yourself, that's why," the gipsy interrupted, with a coarse laugh. "You're afeared o' me, and *must* stop my mouth, just as Capt'n Sale *must* stop yours. That's the long and short on't, Pownall. Well, I'm willing to act wi' you, so long as you play upon the square. But deal falsely wi' me, and look to yourself, man."

"Trust to my honour, my worthy Phaleg. When we've settled this little affair to our mutual satisfaction with Captain Sale — to our mutual satisfaction, I repeat — I shall make myself scarce — emigrate. I've had enough of a vagabond life, and mean to turn my talents to proper account. America's the land for a sharp fellow like me — or Australia."

"Not a bad plan," Phaleg remarked. "I think I shall go to Horsteraylia myself. What say'st thou, Obed? Wilt go wi' thy father?"

"No," the younger gipsy replied, bluntly. "I shall stick to the owd country. Leave me little Robin," he added, patting the donkey's neck, "and I shall be quite content."

"Well, do as thou wilt, lad," Phaleg said. "Thou shalt have Robin, and welcome — though, mayhap, I shall change my mind afore the time comes for starting. Thy mother and Rue mayn't like to go."

"It'll be your own fault, my worthy Phaleg," Simon re-

marked, "if you don't get enough to enable you to live comfortably either here or in Australia."

"That's exactly what I should like, Mester Pownall," the gipsy rejoined, dryly; "so I'm quite ready to act wi' you. Where is the capt'n?"

"At Windsor with his regiment, but I mean to write and appoint a meeting with him without delay. I shall take the liberty of informing him that his future fortune as well as the maintenance of his position in society depend upon his keeping that appointment. If he fails, he must take the consequences."

"He'll come then, you think?"

"I'm sure of it. He daren't refuse. And now for the plan —" Here Simon lowered his voice so much that I could not catch what he said.

"How if he should turn rusty?" Phaleg remarked, after a pause.

"In that case, I'll make him feel my power to its full extent," Pownall rejoined. "But, bless you! it'll never come to that. He may stamp and swear — and call me ugly names, as he has often done before — but I know the way to tame him. I shall use an argument not to be resisted. Only let me threaten to produce the rightful will, and he'll agree to my terms pretty quickly — be they what they may. It won't suit him to lose 2000*l.* a year. It won't suit him to be publicly disgraced, which he will be if it comes to be known that he has been acting under a wrong will, with full understanding that it is wrongful. He has to choose between compliance with my demands, and ruin, Phaleg — absolute ruin."

"Poor young gen'l'man!" Phaleg cried, with affected commiseration. "Don't be too hard upon him."

"I don't want to be extortionate, my tender-hearted Phaleg," Pownall rejoined. "But I must take care of myself,

you know. Besides, I've got to share the spoil with you. We must have a good round sum. It's our last chance. He'll want to have the will delivered up this time."

"He must be a precious fool if he doesn't," Phaleg said. "It's a wonder to me he didn't bargain for it at first — but he didn't know you so well then as he has done since. You haven't got the will about you now? — ha!" he added, with a suddenness that made Simon start, and led me to suspect that he had an evil motive for putting the question.

"No, no," Pownall replied, evidently in some trepidation. "Do you think I would carry such a valuable document as that about me? It is lodged in a place of safety — where no one but myself can find it. One can't be too cautious, you know, worthy Phaleg. One never knows into what sort of company one may get."

"Very true," the other replied. "And I wouldn't advise you to take that precious dokiment i' your pocket when you pays Capt'n Sale a visit, or you may chance to return without it. And I think you'd be all the safer at the interview wi' a friend like me at your elbow. But I wish you'd just explain this to me, Pownall. I never could rightly understand how there comed to be two wills; nor how you managed to get the true will into your possession? I suppose you stole it when you broke into the room where the dead man was lying?"

"Hush! Phaleg," Simon cried; "I don't like to speak of the old chap on a night like this. I'll just take another drop of brandy, and then I'll give you the information you desire. Old Mobb, you must know, had two great-nephews — the present Captain Sale and Mervyn Clitheroe. Clitheroe was his favourite, and he meant to leave him his money, but the lad displeased him by shooting a tabby-cat belonging to the old missis, and Mobb changed his mind, making a will in

favour of Malpas Sale. That was the first will. Pay attention, Phaleg. By-and-by, however, Clitheroe gets into his uncle's good graces again, the tabby-cat is forgotten, the old missis dies, and a second will is made, by which Mervyn becomes heir. That second will is the true will. Pay particular attention now, Phaleg, and you shall hear how the precious document came into my possession. 'Twas a cleverly-managed affair, as you will admit. On the day of his death old Mobb was burning papers in his bedroom, which was on the ground-floor, with a little window looking in the garden, and he meant to have destroyed the first will — the *first will*, mind, Phaleg — placing it on his bed for that purpose. Now the bed being close to the window, and the window being open, and I chancing to be in the garden at the time — watching the old man's proceedings — I seized the opportunity when Mobb's back was turned, thrust in my hand, and grabbed the will."

"But what were the use of grabbin' it, if it warn't the right will?" Phaleg inquired.

"You shall hear, if you'll let me tell the story in my own way, most respectable Phaleg," Simon replied. "The old man didn't perceive what I had done, but thought he had burnt the will, and soon afterwards took to his bed and died. The right will I knew was locked up in a bureau in the bedroom, but I hoped to get the key, in order to enable me to secure that precious document, and put the wrong will in its place. In this I was disappointed — so I was compelled to break into the room at night to accomplish the job."

"At which time I caught sight of you," Phaleg remarked.

"Unluckily for me, but luckily for yourself, you did so, my crafty Phaleg," Simon went on. "My object in making this change of the will must now be apparent to you, methinks.

The second will was found where I had placed it; was read; and Malpas declared heir — heir to 2000 *l.* a year. But the true will being in my possession, I could upset him in a moment by its production. And this I took care to let the fortunate youth know. You would have grinned to see how chopfallen he looked when I gave him the information. However, he saw there was nothing for it but to make terms with me, and he did so without hesitation."

"What did you get out of him, may I ask?" the gipsy said.

"That's scarcely a fair question, worthy Phaleg," Simon replied, "and you must excuse my answering it. I dare say you'll learn, though, at our meeting with the captain, for he'll be sure to rake up old scores. Thus you see, Phaleg — and I'll give it you as the moral of my story — a man should never make a second will till he has burnt the first."

At this moment, I bent forward rather incautiously, and, in doing so, made a slight soise, which caught the quick ears of Obed.

I drew back instantly, but it was evident, from the exclamation of the younger gipsy, that he had seen me.

"There's a man round the corner!" he cried. "I saw him draw back his head."

"A listener!" Pownall exclaimed. "If it should be young Clitheroe, we're done for!"

"If it should be young Clitheroe I'll do for *him*," Phaleg roared, with a fearful oath, that left me little doubt he would try to put his threat into execution. "Come along, Obed."

And, as he spoke, he dashed round the corner, brandishing his bludgeon.

They were within an ace of discovering me, and if it had lightened at the time I must infallibly have been detected.

But I managed to elude them. Instead of attempting flight, which I knew would be useless, I threw myself on the ground, and crept round the corner of the haystack so expeditiously, that I was actually amongst them before they had moved from the spot. Simon Pownall did not quit his post, and I was therefore compelled to bury myself in the hay, which screened me effectually.

The shouts and oaths of the gipsies as they beat about the haystack reached me where I lay, and told me what I had to expect if my hiding-place should be discovered. Presently they came back, greatly enraged at their failure. Phaleg swore lustily at his son, and told him he must have been dreaming; but Obed stoutly maintained the contrary, declaring that he had seen a man's head as plainly as he now beheld his own father's. Where was he, then? What had become of him? Phaleg demanded. Obed couldn't tell; so, after some wrangling, they both held their peace.

The incident served to break up the conference. Simon Pownall, though concurring in opinion with the elder gipsy that Obed must have been deceived, was evidently rendered uneasy, and declined to talk any more on business. Much to my relief — for I began to find my position almost intolerable — I heard him soon afterwards announce his departure. After exchanging a few words with Phaleg, in too low a tone to reach me, he bade him and his son good night, and set off.

Nothing passed between the gipsies for a minute or two, but when Simon, as I presumed, was fairly out of hearing, the elder ruffian observed to his son, with a laugh,

“I tell thee what it is, Obed — I mean to have that will.”

“You do, father?” the younger gipsy replied. “Then you won't work wi' this owd chap?”

“Not unless I'm driven to it, lad,” the other replied.

"I cannot trust him; and I know he doesn't trust me, but means to throw me over, if he can. All Capt'n Sale wants is the will; and he would liever deal wi' me than wi' a greedy curmudgeon like Simon. We must find out where the will be hidden, Obed."

"You don't think as how th' owd chap had it about him to-night?" the son rejoined.

"I had my doubts," Phaleg returned, "and I thought of knockin' him on the head to see. But if I hadn't found it, it would ha' been awk'ard. I should ha' cracked the nut without gettin' the karnal. So I thought it best to let things bide as they be."

"Lucky for him you did think so, father," Obed laughed. "Well, I've a plan, which, if we can bring it to bear, will enable us to stand in Simon's shoes as regards the capt'n. You shall hear what 'tis when I ha' conned it over."

"Well done, Obed," the elder gipsy cried, approvingly. "Thy wits are sharp enough, lad, if thou chooses to give 'em fair play, and not fancy thou sees a man's head round the corner of a hayrick — ha! ha! But come! the rain's over. Bring along Robin, and let's be jogging."

With this he evidently moved off, and his son was not long in following him.

As soon as I deemed the coast clear I shook off the covering of hay, and congratulated myself on my deliverance. If the miscreants had remained many minutes longer, I must have shifted my position, or have been stifled.

Suffering a few minutes more to elapse before quitting the field, I made the best of my way to the mill.

I rose betimes next day, and spent the whole of it in searching for Pownall and the gipsies. But though I scoured the country round for miles, visiting every spot where I thought it likely tidings could be obtained, I learnt nothing.

No one answering to Pownall's description had been seen at Weverham, or any of the adjacent hamlets — nor had lodged — so far as I could discover — at any wayside inn, or hovel. I was equally unsuccessful in my quest of the gipsies. The latter, I found, had been encamped on Delamere Forest during the last week, but had struck their tent a few hours before I assisted at their rendezvous with Pownall at the haystack, and in all probability they had removed to some distant spot.

Sorely disappointed, I rode over on the ensuing day to Marston, for the purpose of consulting with Ned Culcheth. Ned advised me to keep quiet, and not give the alarm. Something would soon be heard, he was sure, of Captain Sale, and the moment he arrived at the vicarage I should be apprised. The captain's movements should be closely watched, and, likely enough, we might catch all the birds we wanted with the same net. I was not very sanguine as to the success of Ned's scheme, but having nothing better of my own to suggest, I agreed to it, and the worthy fellow took measures to carry it out.

But while this matter was in abeyance, another event occurred, which I shall relate in the succeeding chapter.

CHAPTER IV.

I give a Rustic Fête at the Mill.

KIND-HEARTED Miss Hazilrigge, ever anxious to promote harmless amusement, and never so happy as when helping to make other people happy — young people especially — persuaded me to give a rustic fête at the mill, promising to take all trouble of the arrangements off my hands.

“You have only to invite your friends,” the good lady said. “Leave all the rest to me. Of course you will ask John Brideoake and his sister; and I have no doubt Mr. Cuthbert Spring will come over if you send him word. We have seen nothing of him, by-the-by, for the last week. And now, when shall it be? The sooner the better, I think, for the weather is extremely fine just now, and likely to continue so. To-day is Monday — suppose we say Thursday. That will give plenty of time for preparation. But mind, it is merely to be a rustic fête, and quite simple in character, for if any pretension is attempted, or any fine folks are invited, John Brideoake and his sister will never join it, I’m sure.”

“I quite agree with you there, Miss Hazilrigge,” I replied; “and as far as I myself am concerned, I should very much prefer a little out-door entertainment at which my humbler friends can assist — and I will therefore invite Ned Culcheth and his wife. I dare say we shall be able to get up a dance on the green sward near the mill-pool.”

“Delightful!” Miss Hazilrigge cried. “I hope the Culcheths will come. To make sure, you had better say that I

will send some conveyance for them — and they shall be taken back next day. Don't omit to mention that."

"You are kindness itself, dear Miss Hazilrigge," I rejoined, "and leave nothing undone to contribute to the happiness of your friends and dependents."

The fête was therefore fixed for the following Thursday, and I despatched an invitation without delay to Cuthbert Spring. I did not hear from him till the Wednesday morning, when I received a letter to say that he had just returned from London, whither he had been summoned by important business. He would be extremely happy to assist at my rural festivities, he said, and would bring with him his old friend Major Atherton, who had returned with him from town; desiring me to mention to Mr. Hazilrigge that he should claim his hospitality for the night for himself and his friend at the Grange.

"I shall be very glad to see Cuthbert and his friend, of course," Old Hazy said, when I delivered the message. "But who is Major Atherton? I don't recollect him."

I could afford no information, the major being equally a stranger to me, and the old gentleman contented himself with remarking that he had no doubt he must be an agreeable man, or Cuthbert would not have volunteered to bring him.

"Apropos!" he cried. "I dreamed last night of a swan, and that, according to Artemidorus, signifies joy and the revealing of secrets. And the night before, I dreamed that my teeth were whiter, firmer, and more comely than ordinary, denoting, according to Anselmus Julianus, prosperity, good news, and friendship among relations. I have no doubt I shall learn some curious intelligence from Major Atherton, as well as experience much pleasure in his society."

I acquiesced with him in opinion, and here the matter dropped.

My invitation to Ned Culcheth and Sissy was delivered in person. On learning that a light cart would be sent for them early on the morning of the day of the fête, and that the same conveyance would bring them back next day, the only obstacle to their prompt acceptance was removed; and they joyfully promised to come. Sissy said she should look forward with delight to seeing her kind friends at the mill again, and she hoped to be able to bring back little Grace with her, if Dame Mavis would only spare the sweet child for a month. Sissy loved little Grace, she said, as dearly as if she were her own daughter.

Nothing had been heard of Malpas. Ned had caused inquiries to be made at the vicarage, but no letter had been received from him, neither did it appear that he was expected.

The appointed day arrived, and the weather proving highly propitious, I had reason to hope that the fête would go off well. A large level patch of green sward in front of the miller's picturesque abode had been carefully rolled and mown till it resembled a bowling-green, and on this turf the amusements were to take place. Here a marquee was pitched, which had been sent from Owlarton Grange, and, adjoining it, stood a long table, covered with all the essentials of an excellent cold collation: a roast sirloin of beef, roast lamb, pigeon pies, roast fowls, hams, tongues, and other good things too numerous to particularise. Covers were laid for thirty persons, and benches were placed on either side of the table capable of comfortably accommodating that number.

But after all, though good viands and stout ale are not to be despised, a fête would be nothing — in female eyes, at least — without music and dancing. Accordingly, by the kind prevision of Miss Hazilrigge, the Weverham band of musicians was engaged, consisting of a couple of fiddles, a flute, hautboy, and bassoon. A little stage was erected on the right of the

lawn, opposite the marquee, on which chairs and stands were placed; and this constituted the orchestra.

A pretty picture altogether; with a background formed by the mill, and the old-fashioned timber-and-plaster habitation contiguous to it. The latter, with its grey thatched roof, its black-and-white chequer-work, and its transom windows, was quite as pleasing an object as the mill itself. On the right of the green was a small but prettily laid-out garden, screened off by a low privet hedge; and on the left lay the orchard, which I have heretofore had occasion to describe. A couple of gaily-decorated boats were moored to the margin of the mill-pool, and hard by the wooden steps, serving as a landing-place, grew a beautiful weeping willow, its pendent branches dipping into the water.

Such was the scene presented to my gaze as I contemplated it with Mr. Ponder, shortly before the arrival of the company.

But pleasing as I then thought it, it was nothing to what it afterwards became, when the green was thronged by merry groups, when every seat at the long table was occupied, and the viands were in a state of active demolition, when laugh and jest went round, when the butler and his assistants were in full employ, when the musicians struck up their liveliest strains, and good-looking lads and buxom lasses footed it blithely in the country dance and the jig.

But lo! an arrival. It is Miss Hazilrigge. Three o'clock is the hour appointed for the fête, but she comes a little earlier, wishing to be satisfied that her directions have been properly carried out. After looking round, and examining all the preparations with a critical eye, the good lady claps her hands with delight, declaring that all had been done to admiration. Mr. Ponder appropriates the compliment to himself, and bows respectfully. Mr. Hazilrigge comes next with Ora, who is

charmingly attired, and looks more bewitching than ever in her pretty straw hat. The old gentleman seizes my arm, and tells me, with a comical look, which I scarcely know how to interpret, that he has invited two persons to my fête—a gipsy woman and her daughter. Seeing me stare at him, he hastens to add, “but they’re both very decent, well-mannered people, and won’t offend anybody. The daughter is one of the prettiest creatures you ever beheld—with such a pair of black eyes—such supple limbs—and such a little foot. She dances like a Spanish gitana. Doesn’t she, Ora?”

“She is exceedingly pretty, indeed, and dances with inimitable grace,” his niece replied. “Her raven tresses and superb black eyes are enough to make one turn pale with envy. I am very glad my uncle has bidden her to your fête, Mervyn, for she will be quite an attraction to it. The only misfortune is, she will turn the heads of all the men, and make them indifferent to their homely partners. Her mother tells fortunes capitally, and will afford amusement to the younger damsels and their admirers. She wanted to give me a peep into the future this morning—but I declined.”

“She told my fortune, though,” Old Hazy cried, “and told it remarkably well. I’m not going to let you into my secrets, you saucy minx,” he added to Ora, “so you needn’t expect it. But as I was saying, this gipsy woman told me a great deal that *has* happened to me, and that is only known to myself and to one other person—and a great deal that *will* happen to me. She seems as well versed in chiromancy as Dr. Hooker himself.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if she has derived some of her information concerning previous events in your history from that respectable individual,” I observed. But, seeing the old gentleman look rather blank, I added, “Well, I am very glad you have invited the gipsy pair. Ora’s description of the

daughter makes me curious to see her, and the mother's skill in soothsaying shall be put to the test."

Soon after this, Apphia and her brother arrived, and I flew to bid them welcome. They told me I might expect a large attendance, for the glen was thronged with young folks of both sexes on their way from Weverham. I may here mention that I had left the Weverham invitations to John, as his acquaintance with the village folk enabled him to make a better selection than I could do. I had not given him a very agreeable office, he said, for when a rumour of the fête got abroad everybody wanted to go to it, and numbers were of course disappointed.

But here they come! A large party of lads and lasses, in holiday attire, step upon the green, preceded by Mr. Mavis, who, arrayed in his Sunday habiliments, and having a large bunch of white ribands stuck on his breast, performs the part of usher, takes tickets, and presents the company to me. The young men look rather sheepish at first, and the damsels somewhat bashful, but, encouraged by the bland and friendly manner of Miss Hazilrigge, by the smiles and kind addresses of the younger ladies, and I may venture to say by my own not uncourteous reception, they speedily regain their confidence, and appear quite at ease. By this time, also, the band of musicians have arrived, and taking their places on the orchestra, after a brief preliminary tuning of their instruments, strike up a lively air, and on the instant every countenance becomes animated, and every tongue is unloosed.

After a short interval, more guests arrive — a second detachment of village lads and lasses, more numerous than the first. Mr. Mavis has enough to do to get them all forward, and laughs heartily at their uncouth bows and scrapes, and their funny curtseys. Then come the miller's men — such of them as are married, with their wives and children. Then more

villagers, until at last the green is quite thronged. At last — just when I have begun to give them up — to my great satisfaction, I descry Ned Culcheth and Sissy. They are accompanied by Dame Mavis and her little daughter. The crowd draw aside to afford them passage as they advance towards me. Sissy comes first, holding Grace by the hand, looking more like her former self than I have seen her of late. If anything, improved, for, while she has quite recovered her bloom and beauty, her manner is sedate and wholly free from levity. For manly bearing, not one in that assemblage can compare with Ned Culcheth; and yet there are some stout, well-looking lads amidst it too. Ned is a first-rate specimen of a stalwart English yeoman. I feel quite proud of him. His heart beams out in his honest countenance, and makes itself felt in his warm grasp. Giving him and his wife a cordial welcome, I tell Sissy I am glad to perceive that she has returned to her primitive Welsh hat, as a bonnet does not suit her half so well. She colours a little, and turns to her husband, who informs me, with a laugh, that his missis has put on the hat thinking to please me. Well, she *has* succeeded, if such was her intention. Unbidden thoughts cross me. As I look at Sissy and contrast her present cheerful expression and composed manner with her recent woful condition as exhibited on this very spot, I can scarcely believe in the reality of the change. The past now only appears like a troubled dream. Some thoughts of a like nature probably occur to Sissy, for I observe her lip quiver, and a tear start to her eye. Her husband notices her emotion too, and, guessing the cause, catches little Grace in his arms, and holds her up to his wife to receive a kiss. But this does not improve matters, but rather makes them worse, for as Sissy strains her little pet to her bosom, her tears can no longer be repressed, and she rushes away until her emotion quite subsides. But this is the only occasion on which she

gives way, and as Dame Mavis kindly says, "it be quite excusable." For my own part, I think all the better of her for the display of feeling. "I do believe Sissy loves my child as well as I do myself," Dame Mavis chatters on; "and I be quite sure the child be as fond of her as she be of her own mother. Therefore, I can't find i' my heart to deny 'em both since Sissy wants to take Grace home wi' her for a month — and I shall e'en let the child go."

Behold a grave and respectable-looking personage, in a blue coat and white waistcoat, with a stately, not to say majestic, deportment! Mr. Ponder comes to tell me that the benches at the table are fully occupied, and the guests eager to fall to — so I accompany the stately butler, and by our joint exertions, aided by those of Mr. Hazilrigge and John Brideoake, every plate is speedily filled, and nearly as speedily emptied. My guests, I must say, whether male or female, have no lack of appetite, and do ample justice to the good things set before them. Luckily, the supply is equal to the demand. Mr. Ponder smiles in his grave manner as he sees the havoc I am making with the noble sirloin of beef — very little of which now remains — and tells me, in an under tone, not to be alarmed, for he has famous cold roast "ribs" in the tent. "I don't think they will eat us quite out, sir," the butler adds. Old Hazy seems enchanted with the scene; declaring that it does him good to see such real, hearty, unsophisticated enjoyment. "I would rather witness a simple feast of this kind," he says, "than a grand civic banquet, with my Lord Mayor at its head." Jugs of stout ale are handed round by old Finch and Rivers, and their contents liberally dispensed.

At length the fire begins to slacken, and it becomes evident that the majority of the party have had enough. Ponder seizes this opportunity of handing round the wine, and having

served each of the guests with a glass of fine old sherry, which makes the lads smack their lips with satisfaction, and brightens the eyes of the lasses, the butler informs the company, with a politeness that is generally appreciated, that he is extremely sorry to disturb them, but they must excuse him for intimating that their places were required by the next party. On this they all rise in high glee, tender their thanks to me, and the squire, and madam (meaning Miss Hazilrigge), and the young parson (meaning John), and the young ladies. The benches they have vacated are then instantly reoccupied.

The same scene is acted over again, and the second batch of guests display just as good appetites as the first, and keep us all actively employed. A third party succeeding, evidently possessing as vigorous powers of demolition as those who had gone before, I am fain to resign my post of carver-general to Old Hazy, who very kindly undertakes it for me, and discharges it to the entire satisfaction of the guests.

Meanwhile, other amusements have been going on. The boats have been put in requisition. Ned Culcheth, who plies a famous oar, having had plenty of practice on Marston Mere, has taken his wife and little Grace on a trip to the upper end of the pool, while the second boat has been manned by two of the miller's men, and filled with young village folk of either sex, whose songs and merry laughter can be heard during the whole of their passage across the sheet of water. Ned happens to bring back his party at the very moment of my quitting my post at the refreshment-table, and I am just in time, therefore, to assist Sissy to land.

A hubbub at the further end of the green now informs me of the arrival of the pair of fortune-tellers. Disengaging themselves, as well as they can, from the crowd, by whom

they are instantly surrounded, the two gipsy women make towards me. As they approach, I have no difficulty in recognising my old acquaintance, Peninnah, while her companion must certainly be Rue. The charms of the latter have not been exaggerated, either by Old Hazy or his niece. Look at her as she comes along. If that is not a pretty girl, I don't know one when I see her. What with her singular personal attractions, and her characteristic and picturesque attire, she offers quite a study for you, if you are a painter. Slight in figure, and pliant of limb, her movements are as easy and agile as those of a fawn. Her features are cast in a delicate mould; nose fine and straight; lips ripe and full, and as vivid as carnation; teeth like a casket of pearls. You must expect her complexion to be dark, but there is a rich glow beneath the skin that gives it inexpressible warmth and beauty. Her eyes are large, black, and full of fire, yet veiled by long silken eyelashes, that mitigate their radiance. Her brows are dark as night, and her jetty tresses are coiled by a coloured Valencian handkerchief, which she wears, coquettishly tied, over the back of her head. Her dress is somewhat showy in point of colour, and fanciful in make, but it suits her perfectly. There, I have done. You ought to have her before you.

Gipsy women wear well, or possess some secret for the preservation of their charms. Old age comes upon them at once, and not by degrees. Peninnah's hair is as raven black as ever, and her eyes as bright; but her cheek-bones are higher than they used to be, and her features generally sharper and more prominent. Still, she may be reckoned a handsome woman. Her countenance has an expression of greater cunning than I remember noticing in it before, and her glances are restless and suspicious. She marches boldly up to me, but notwithstanding her confident air, I can see that

she rather doubts the reception she may meet with. She addresses me in the usual formula — asking leave to tell my fortune. I refuse.

“Nay, let me see your hand, my handsome young gentleman,” she says; “it ben’t the first time I have looked at it. I told you your fortune truly then, and I’ll tell it as truly now. Ask him to let me look at his hand, my pretty young lady,” she added to Ora. “I know he won’t refuse *you*.”

“Oh! you are quite mistaken if you suppose I have any influence over Mr. Clitheroe, my good woman,” Ora rejoined. “He won’t mind what I say.”

“Try,” Peninnah cried. “I warrant you’ll succeed.”

Ora looked at me, and unwilling to disoblige her, I held out my hand to the gipsy woman’s inspection.

“Give me a piece of silver,” Peninnah said; “gold would be better, if you have it.”

“Silver must suffice,” I replied, giving her a half-crown. “What do you discover?” I added, as she gazed into the palm of my hand, and attentively perused its lines.

“A good deal,” she replied — “a good deal, that you will be glad to know. But you must step aside with me to hear it, for it won’t do to speak before all the world.”

“Oh! you needn’t be under any apprehension, my good woman,” Ora said. “Mr. Clitheroe won’t mind our hearing what you have to tell. Will you, Mervyn?”

“I am sure he will,” Peninnah rejoined, “and therefore I daren’t speak. But I will tell you thus much, my pretty young lady, that he’s a young gentleman as is born to good luck, though his troubles ben’t yet entirely over.”

“No, I should think not,” Ora cried, with a laugh.

“Why don’t you let the woman see your hand, Miss Deveton?” I said.

“Because I’m afraid,” she replied.

"Don't be afraid of me," Peninnah exclaimed, in a coaxing voice. "I will tell you nothing disagreeable — that I promise you."

"On that condition, I am willing to try your skill," Ora returned, taking off her glove, and resigning her white little hand to the gipsy woman.

Peninnah studied its lines attentively for a few minutes, and then looked up perplexed.

"Mind! you are only to tell me what is agreeable," Ora cried. "I am almost as superstitious as my uncle, and if misfortune were predicted, I should be miserable."

"Don't be uneasy, my sweet young lady," Peninnah said. "Your path is a path of flowers, as far as I can see. But I thought there was an early marriage, and something that I can't make out seems to hinder it. I should like to look at that gentleman's hand," she added, pointing to John Brideoake, who was standing at a little distance, watching what was going forward.

"Why at *his* hand?" Ora demanded, colouring.

"Oh! be sure I have good reason for making the request, my sweet young lady," Peninnah said. "Will you allow the poor gipsy woman to see your hand, sir?" she added to John.

But he coldly and decidedly refused, crossing his arms upon his breast.

"Never for such a purpose," he said. "I have no faith in your practices, and will never encourage them."

"As you please, sir," Peninnah replied, fixing her dark eyes upon him, "but if I were to tell you all I have just learnt, you would own there is some truth in the art I practise. Let me look at your hand, young lady," she added, turning to Apphia, who was standing near her brother.

"On no account," Apphia rejoined, uneasily, and clinging to John.

"What! you are also afraid of me? — ha!" Peninnah exclaimed, with a half contemptuous laugh. "Have you no curiosity to peer into the future — no wish to know what will befall you? Your brother despises my art, and thinks me a cheat. Show me your hand, and you shall see whether I deserve to be so accounted."

"Yes do, Apphia," Ora cried, rushing up to her. "I want to hear what she will say."

"Well, since you desire it, I will not oppose your wishes," Apphia said, "though I am quite as incredulous as John." And as she spoke, she surrendered her hand to Peninnah, who rapidly traced its lines.

"Ah! what is this I see?" the gipsy woman exclaimed. "You say you are incredulous. Now mark my words. You will be suddenly summoned from this place, and will go — shall I tell you where?"

"No, I don't care to learn," Apphia said, with evident uneasiness.

"I can tell you whither you will go, and what will occur to you," Peninnah pursued. "Strange things are in store for you, and great surprises — some risk, perhaps, of which I can give you a warning, if you will listen to me."

"Desist, woman," John Brideoake interposed. "I will not allow you to listen to her longer, Apphia." And taking his sister's arm, he drew her away.

A sudden cry startled me at this juncture, and turning, I found it had proceeded from Sissy Culcheth. After disembarking from the boat, Sissy had seated herself on the bank near the weeping willow with little Grace, and was so much occupied in playing and chatting with the child, that she had not noticed the arrival of the gipsy pair. Grace at

last perceived them, calling Sissy's attention to Peninnah, who was now close at hand. On beholding her, Sissy started to her feet, with the half scream I have described. Ned Culcheth heard the cry as well as myself, and was instantly by her side, anxiously inquiring what was the matter?

"There she is!" Sissy exclaimed, in accents of alarm. "That's the black gipsy 'oomans who told me my fortunes, and said you would kill me. How she looks at us! I wish she would go away. She frightens me."

"Shake off your fear, Sissy," Ned cried. "She shan't meddle with you. Away with you, woman!" he added, with a menacing look at Peninnah.

"I don't want to meddle with her," the gipsy woman replied. "I bear her no ill-will. But my words came true, and she knows it. Let her think over what I *did* say, and she'll find I was right. She has had a narrow escape — but the danger is past now, and the rest of her days will be free from trouble."

"Well, there's comfort in that, at all events," Ned said.

"Ay, but I have yet more comfort for her," Peninnah went on. "The dearest wish of her heart will be gratified."

"What's that you tell me?" Sissy cried, gazing eagerly at her.

"The wish nearest your heart is to possess a child like this — ben't it?" Peninnah said. "Let me look at your hand, and I will tell you whether you will have your wish." And as Sissy extended her hand — not without some misgiving — towards her, she added, "Ere three years are flown you will be the mother of two children."

"You promise this, my good 'oomans?" Sissy exclaimed, joyfully.

"Soh! I am a good woman now," Peninnah cried. "But no matter! good or bad, my words will come to pass."

While Peninnah was thus occupied, Rue, who was standing a few paces off, signed to me to follow her, and moved towards the edge of the mill-pool. Struck by her manner, which seemed to indicate that she had something to communicate to me, I complied, and soon drew near her. Without appearing to notice my approach, or even looking at me, she said, in a low tone, "Be cautious where you go! you are in danger."

"From whom?" I demanded.

"I dare not give you further explanation now," she replied; "but I will try to have a word with you before I leave."

Here we were interrupted by Peninnah, who, calling sharply to her daughter, bade her to come back to her at once.

As soon as I could get an opportunity, I took Ned Culcheth aside, and told him to keep an eye upon the gipsy pair. "But be careful not to alarm them," I said. "When they take their departure, follow them, and find out where they go. I am concerned to give you all this trouble, Ned. But I know you are willing — nay, anxious to serve me."

"'Anxious' is the word, sir," the honest fellow replied. "I was thinkin' of doin' it of my own accord; and I trust to bring you tidings before many hours of the whereabouts of Phaleg and his hopeful son — perhaps of the sly old fox, Pownall himself. That gipsy girl is woundy pratty — pity she comes of such a bad stock! I'll just give Sissy a hint of my plans, that she mayn't be uneasy when I go."

Another interruption. Busy Miss Hazilrigge comes up, and tells me she has been looking for me everywhere. She urges me to call for a country dance, and acting upon her

suggestion, I at once engage Ora, and then clapping my hands to attract general attention, bid the musicians strike up their merriest tune. The signal causes an immediate stir amidst the assemblage, and in another moment some twenty or thirty young couples stand opposite to each other on the green. Ropes of flowers are then distributed to the dancers by Miss Hazilrigge, who is followed by Rivers, with a large basketful of these wreaths, and the mode of using them is explained by the kind lady. All the damsels are greatly pleased with the garlands, and of course their partners cannot be behind them in admiration. In an instant we are all in our places — Ora, who is full of animation and delight, standing opposite to me. Mr. Mavis and Sissy Culcheth form the second couple — and Ned and little Grace, who is perfectly wild with pleasure, the third. All being in order, the dance commences — and in right earnest. If mistakes are now and then made in the figure, and the ropes of flowers get occasionally entangled, and bring somebody to the ground, or knock off a hat or a bonnet, our enjoyment is not diminished by these incidents. On the contrary, they add zest to the dance. After a little practice, and with Ora's directions, the lads and lasses manage the ropes of flowers extremely well, and, when several couples are dancing, the effect is uncommonly good. Instead of hands across, the ends of the garlands merely are taken, and when going down the middle, the lads not unfrequently twine the flowery ropes round their partners' waists, or hold them above their heads. Ora is enchanted, for the idea of the garlands has originated with her. Though flushed with exertion, she declares she is not in the slightest degree fatigued, but will go down the dance again. The tune is changed, at her request, and we are just about to set off, when I become suddenly transfixed.

The musicians play on, but I heed them not. Mr. Mavis

vociferates, "Now, sir, push it!" — the worthy man means *poussette*. Sissy stares, and Ora playfully chides me. But I do not stir.

I was transfixed in the manner I have described by the arrival of a tall, gentlemanlike, military-looking personage, attired in black, whom I instantly recognised as the stranger I had seen near the grave in Marston churchyard. He was standing near Cuthbert Spring, who was evidently pointing me out to him — and unless I was mistaken, the stranger regarded me with peculiar interest. At all events, I felt an interest in him for which I could in no way account. Who could he be? and how came he to be with Cuthbert Spring? Suddenly it occurred to me that he must be Major Atherton. Yet why should Major Atherton take an interest in me, or I in Major Atherton? That remained to be seen.

How long I should have continued in this state, if Ora had not roused me, I cannot tell. But at last she succeeded in diverting my attention from the stranger, and dragged me into the dance.

"Why, Mervyn," she cried, "what on earth is the matter with you? Don't you see we are all waiting? Pick up your garland, and come down the middle with me at once. How slow you are, to be sure! You seem to have lost all your spirits."

I did my best, but my interest in the dance was gone, and I proved so dull a partner, that Ora began to scold once more, and again inquired what had produced such an extraordinary change?

"I can't account for it myself," I replied, "but a person has just arrived, whose looks seem to exercise an unaccountable influence over me. You can see him. He is there — standing near Cuthbert Spring."

"I can see nothing extraordinary about him," Ora replied,

“except that he is very tall — and for a person of his years tolerably good-looking. Who is he?”

“I should think he must be Major Atherton, whom Cuthbert Spring proposed to bring with him.”

“Oh, no doubt!” Ora cried. “I hope he will prove an agreeable acquaintance. But come! Exert yourself, do sir! Major Atherton, I perceive, is watching us! Let us show him that we can execute the dance with spirit.”

Stimulated by her remarks, I shook off the sort of lethargy into which I had fallen, and acquitted myself so well, that I soon regained my merry partner’s good opinion. At last the dance was over, and Ora then said, “Now let us go and take a nearer view of this mysterious individual. Upon my word,” she whispered, as we approached him, “for an elderly gentleman he is remarkably good-looking. He has a distinguished bearing, and a very fine countenance.”

Here we were greeted by Cuthbert Spring, who left his friend, and came towards us. After shaking hands with us, and paying Ora a few compliments in his usual gallant style, he congratulated me on the success of the fête — saying that the arrangements were excellent, and everybody looked happy.

“My friend, Major Atherton, is greatly pleased with the entertainment,” he went on. “You must allow me to present the major to you, Mervyn, and to you, also, Miss Dovelton.”

I expressed the pleasure I should feel at the introduction in fitting terms, but inquired of Cuthbert whether he had known Major Atherton long, as I did not remember to have heard him mention him before.

“Perhaps not,” Cuthbert rejoined, with an odd smile. “Atherton is one of my oldest friends, and I have a very great regard for him. He has been abroad for some years.

But he shall speak for himself." So saying, he called to his friend, who immediately complied with the summons, and, stepping towards us, was formally presented to Ora and myself. He certainly did seem very proud — this Major Atherton — excessively proud, for he merely bowed — rather stiffly, too, I thought — on his introduction to me, and directed his conversation chiefly to Ora. But though annoyed by his haughtiness, I was resolved to make him talk to me, and I therefore remarked,

"I think I have seen you before, Major Atherton?"

"Indeed, sir! where?" he exclaimed, quickly.

"In Marston churchyard," I replied, "and under somewhat singular circumstances."

"No more of this now, I entreat you, sir," he cried, with sudden emotion. "I know to what you refer. But I did not suppose you had been there. I know recollect that some one came upon me unawares. You were the person I suppose. I will give you an explanation of the circumstance on a more fitting occasion."

"What is this?" Cuthbert Spring cried, quickly.

"Oh! nothing — nothing," I replied, not willing to press my inquiries further.

"Though you are unacquainted with Major Atherton, Mervyn," Mr. Spring said, after consulting his friend by a look, "I ought to tell you that he is an old friend of your family, and knew your mother extremely well."

"Did he?" I cried. "Then I understand it all, and require no further explanation. We must know each other better, since this is the case, Major Atherton."

"We must, sir," he answered. "Your mother was a most amiable person — far too good for him she married."

"Hold! major," I cried. "Praise one parent as much as you please, but say nothing against the other."

"I merely meant to imply that your father was not worthy of so much goodness," Major Atherton replied, with a grave smile, "and it is perfectly true. Nobody knows his unworthiness better than I do."

"Unworthiness is a term I do not like," I said, rather sharply; "neither do I quite recognise your right to judge of my father's conduct."

"I admire the feeling you exhibit," Major Atherton returned, with perfect calmness; "but, if I am correctly informed, you do not know your father. I do. I know him as well as I know myself; and I am satisfied that his first wife was far above his deserts. He thinks so himself—says so."

"That may be your opinion, and you are, of course entitled to it," I rejoined; "but it is not necessary to depreciate my father in order to exalt my mother, and I really cannot allow such a course to be pursued."

"On my soul, you are a warm-hearted young fellow," Major Atherton cried. "I should not have thought you could entertain so much regard for a father whom you have never beheld, and who, by all accounts, doesn't appear to have done too much for you—eh, Cuthbert?"

"No," Mr. Spring replied, with a singular smile, "I can't say that I think my friend Colonel Clitheroe has done overmuch for his son."

"I have no complaint to make against him," I returned, "and you will allow that I am the person principally interested."

"No; I will do you the justice to say, Mervyn, that I never heard you utter a word against your father," Cuthbert Spring remarked.

"It is much to your credit, sir," Major Altherton said, addressing me. "Under such circumstances, I don't think I

should have been equally contented. But Colonel Clitheroe has not been quite so much to blame as might appear —”

“I don’t think he has been to blame at all,” I interrupted: “and I must again observe, that these comments on my father’s character are anything but agreeable to me.”

“Whom are you talking of, gentlemen?” Old Hazy inquired, joining the group.

“Of Colonel Clitheroe, Mervyn’s father,” Mr. Spring answered. “The colonel, I must say, has a warm advocate in his son. It would afford him great pleasure, I am sure, if he knew how prompt Mervyn is to take his part.”

“I am sure it would,” Major Atherton rejoined. “Thus much I can say for Colonel Clitheroe — and I say it from personal knowledge — he takes great interest in his son. He fancied all was going smoothly with him, and that he had been adopted by Mrs. Mervyn.”

“I have not troubled my father much with my affairs of late,” I observed.

“There you were wrong — excuse my freedom in saying so,” Major Atherton cried. “It was your duty to let your father know exactly how you were circumstanced. How can a father advise his son, or assist him, if kept in entire ignorance of his proceedings? It was your bounden duty, I repeat, to acquaint Colonel Clitheroe with all that has happened to you.”

“Well, major, I admit the force of what you say,” I replied, “but such remarks do not seem to come with entire propriety from a stranger.”

“I am a stranger to you, sir,” Major Atherton said; “but my intimacy with your father warrants me in speaking freely. Possessed, as I am, of his opinions — more than any one else — I may almost be considered as his representative here.”

"In that light, I am willing to concede you perfect freedom of speech," I rejoined, "and I promise not to take offence at anything you may say."

A seasonable interruption was here offered, by Mr. Ponder coming up to announce that refreshments were ready, if we chose to partake of them, and we all proceeded to the table. On the way, Major Atherton was introduced to John Brideoake and Apphia, and soon fell into conversation with both of them. He seemed especially pleased with the latter, and took a place on the bench beside her, on sitting down to the collation. While we were engaged in discussing the good things, Peninnah and her daughter approached the table, and addressed themselves to Old Hazy.

"What an uncommonly pretty girl!" Cuthbert Spring cried, pointing to Rue. "Does she tell fortunes as well as her mother? If so, I should like to try her skill. Come hither, my dear," he cried. "Can you give me a glimpse into futurity?"

"To be sure I can, sir," she replied, stepping towards him. "You are a gay and a lucky gentleman, I can see. Love will never break your heart, sir."

"I should think not, indeed," Miss Hazilrigge exclaimed, glancing at her elderly admirer.

"Let me look at your hand, my merry gentleman," Rue continued, "and I'll tell you all about it." And as Cuthbert surrendered his palm to her inspection, she added, "You have been a gay deceiver in your time, as I said just now, sir, and have given many a fair lady a heartache."

"What's that I hear?" Miss Hazilrigge cried, turning scarlet.

"Take care!" Cuthbert Spring muttered. "Don't make mischief. You're on tender ground — hum!"

"The poor ladies themselves were to blame, and not you,

sir," Rue went on. "You couldn't help it, you know, if they chose to pull caps for you."

"But you said he was a deceiver, young woman?" Miss Hazilrigge cried.

"I ought to have said, that it was the ladies that took him too much at his word, ma'am," Rue rejoined, "and thought he meant more than he really did — poor deluded creatures! — but the merry gentleman himself was too artful to be caught."

"I am afraid you give him a very bad character," Miss Hazilrigge remarked.

"Lor' bless you, no, ma'am. The merry gentleman has been a great admirer of our sex in his time, but he's less of a rover than he used to be, and will soon settle down quietly enough. He has fixed his affections on some one who will make him a vast deal happier than he has ever yet been as a bachelor. A country life will be his portion —"

"What's that I hear?" Miss Hazilrigge cried, eagerly.

"I was observing, ma'am, that a country life will be the merry gentleman's portion," Rue rejoined; "and fortunate it is for him that it will be so, for his days will be prolonged thereby."

"Dear heart a day!" Miss Hazilrigge exclaimed. "How very, very surprising, to be sure!"

"Bravo!" Cuthbert Spring exclaimed. "Never was truer fortune told. You deserve a piece of gold, my dear, for the talent you have displayed," he added, taking out his purse, and giving her a sovereign. "Now try your skill on the lady."

"Permit me, ma'am," Rue said, taking Miss Hazilrigge's plump hand. "You have your trials, I see, ma'am. Things have gone counter more than once, and a match has been broken off only two days before it ought to have taken place."

"Dear me! aunt, is this true?" Ora cried. "I never heard of any such match."

"Nor I!" Cuthbert Spring added.

"The lady doesn't contradict me," Rue proceeded. "But it's very well the marriage didn't take place, for she would have been a widow now with ten children."

"A lucky escape, indeed!" Cuthbert Spring cried, with a forced laugh.

"Well, this is very extraordinary, I must say," Old Hazy cried, laughing heartily. (I half suspect he had given Rue a few hints in private.) "I won't mention names, but the gentleman to whom my sister was engaged is dead, and his widow has ten children."

General laughter followed this piece of information, and the merriment was not diminished when Rue said, "You won't die single, ma'am, that I can promise you. Ere six months are over, you'll have a wedding-ring on your finger."

"There, aunt!" Ora cried to the blushing spinster, "I hope you're satisfied now."

"Come, Atherton," Cuthbert Spring said to the major, "it is your turn. Display your hand to the girl, and let us see whether she can read your past and future life from its lines."

"I can read either," Rue rejoined. "The gentleman has only to choose."

"Keep to the past, then," Major Atherton said. "I don't desire to know the future."

Upon this the girl took his hand, and studied it carefully for a short space. At last, her features assumed an air of perplexity, and she called to Peninnah, "Look here, mother! Something puzzles me about this cross-line."

"It's not often you are puzzled," the elder gipsy replied, bending forward to examine the Major's palm. "Why, it's

plain enough, that cross-line denotes a death. The gentleman has lost his wife. And look! here's another cross-line —"

"Enough! enough!" Major Atherton cried, snatching his hand hastily away. "I don't want to hear any more of this idle nonsense. You make a guess, and pretend you have hit upon the truth."

"At all events, you must admit that I have made a shrewd guess," Peninnah said.

"I admit nothing," Major Atherton cried, sternly. "The girl confessed her ignorance, and you are no better informed."

"I didn't choose to speak out," Rue said — "that was why I consulted my mother. But if you wish me to tell all I read," she added, with marked emphasis, "I will do so. But don't blame me afterwards."

"Poh! poh! you can tell nothing that I should care to have concealed," the major said, with affected indifference. But I could see that he was not altogether free from uneasiness.

"Let me whisper a word to you," Rue rejoined, bringing her lips close to the major's ear, and saying something to him in a low tone.

He started on hearing her remark, and could not conceal his annoyance. Cuthbert Spring seemed greatly surprised, and made a sign to his friend, which I could not understand.

"Do you wish me to tell the company what I have told you, sir?" Rue cried, with an air of triumph.

"On no account," Major Atherton rejoined, hastily; "not that there is anything in it — but — in short, I don't desire it — so here's a piece of gold," he added, taking out his purse, "to seal your lips."

"It will seal them effectually," she rejoined, dropping him a very graceful curtsy.

"Well, major," Old Hazy exclaimed, with a laugh, "you must own after this that there's more in chiromancy than you suspected. I myself am a firm believer in the art, and have a large collection of writers on the subject. I dare say this pretty lass never heard of Jean Indagine, Taisner, Cocles, or Romphiles."

"Never of one of them," Rue replied. "My mother was my sole instructress in the art of palmistry. She knows all the secrets of our people."

Meanwhile, dancing has been going on almost without interruption, and a fresh country dance being now about to be formed, Cuthbert Spring proposes that we shall all join it, and by way of setting us a good example, offers his hand to Miss Hazilrigge. The elderly spinster simpers a little, but she does not refuse him, and is led forth in triumph. Major Atherton prefers a similar request to Ora, and is equally successful. Apphia naturally falls to my share. Old Hazy has not danced for years, he says, but he won't remain idle on an occasion like the present, so he looks about for the prettiest partner he can find, and chooses Rue, who appears much flattered. John Brideoake looks on with a kindly smile — pleased that we all seem so happy. A right merry dance we have, for the performances of Cuthbert Spring and Miss Hazilrigge afford us infinite diversion. As they go down the middle and come back enchained in a rope of flowers, their appearance is so comical that it is next to impossible to help laughing. Ora puts no restraint upon her mirth, and even Major Atherton's stern features relax into a smile. Poor Miss Hazilrigge, who is rather stout, and wholly unaccustomed to such violent exercise, finds it a little too much for her, and as soon as she gets to the bottom of the dance, withdraws with her partner, to cool herself and recover her breath. Old Hazy astonishes everybody by his display of activity; and

Mr. Ponder lifts up his hands in perfect amazement as he watches his master capering about — clapping his hands, calling out to the rustic lads and lasses by name, and bidding them bestir themselves, laughing, shouting, even singing. Rue dances exquisitely — it is quite a treat to behold her. As she takes my hand in the course of the dance, she slightly presses it, and whispers something, but I cannot catch what she says. From the direction of her glances I perceive that her mother's eye is upon her — and I am careful. The old woman watches her like a lynx. Encouraged by Old Hazy's example, and incited by his shouts and gesticulations, the various couples he comes near do their best to please him, and many are the vagaries in consequence. By the time, however, that the old gentleman gets to the bottom of the dance he has had enough of it, and, like his sister, retires to recruit. The dance, however, continues for some time longer, for the rustic couples have strong limbs and are not easily tired, but at last the musicians cease to play — being unable or unwilling to go on — and we come to a sudden stop. The lads and lasses then disperse about the green, and separating from the throng, I walk with Apphia towards the margin of the pool. Here we stand together for a few moments in silence. Words of tenderness rise to my lips, but I dare not give utterance to them. I cannot help, however, fixing an impassioned glance upon her, which proclaims my meaning as plainly as words could do. She makes no response, except a sigh. But what is this? John Brideoake comes towards us, bearing a letter, and, judging by his looks, he brings disagreeable intelligence.

“A special messenger has just arrived with a post-chaise, bringing this despatch from our mother,” he said, giving Apphia the letter.

Scarcely able to repress her agitation, she hurriedly broke

the seal, and after glancing at the contents of the missive, returned it to John.

"Dear Mrs. Mervyn has become suddenly worse," she said to me, "and desires to see me. My mother enjoins me to start without an instant's delay, if I hope to see her alive, and has sent a post-chaise for me. Oh! who would have expected this!" she exclaimed, bursting into tears.

"It is indeed sad and startling intelligence," I cried. "Mrs. Mervyn dying! — then all my hopes are at an end."

"What is this I hear?" Cuthbert Spring cried, hurrying up to us. "Did you not say that Mrs. Mervyn is dying?"

"A letter, this moment received from Mrs. Brideoake, announces the sad intelligence," I replied.

"The attack must be very sudden, then," Cuthbert Spring rejoined. "I saw Dr. Foam yesterday, and in reply to my inquiries about the poor lady, he told me she was going on tolerably well."

"I cannot refuse credit to my mother's statement," John Brideoake said. "Her words are these: 'A sudden and dangerous change has taken place in the dear invalid, and I fear she may not last many days — perhaps not many hours. She speaks much of you, and earnestly desires to behold you once again, ere her eyes are closed for ever; and if you have any affection left for her or for me, you will come to her on receipt of this, without a moment's delay. The messenger to whose care I entrust this note will bring a post-chaise for you. I confidently expect you ere night. Farewell!'"

"What if it be a device to get Apphia once more into her power?" I cried.

"It looks suspicious, I must own," Cuthbert Spring said. "And yet we may be wrong. Miss Brideoake cannot refuse to go."

"Certainly not," John replied.

"But she must not go unattended," I cried. "Some one must accompany her. I will ride by the side of the chaise, and escort her safely to the Anchorite's."

"Your kindness is unnecessary, Mervyn," John said. "I myself shall accompany her. We are both grieved to quit your pleasant fête so soon — but it cannot be helped. Come, Apphia, there must be no delay. Mervyn will excuse us, and explain our abrupt departure to our friends."

I promised to do so; and as I conducted Apphia to the postchaise, I told her I should certainly ride over to Cottonborough that night, and present myself on the morrow at the Anchorite's.

"To what end?" she cried. "You will not be admitted."

"Oh! yes, I shall," I replied. "Comberbach will let me in, if he knows I am coming. Direct him to be at the garden-gate precisely at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. I shall be there. It is of the last importance to me to see my kind relative once more, and I trust through your assistance, to accomplish the object."

"I will give you all the aid I can, Mervyn," she replied, "but I despair of success. Even if Mrs. Mervyn should be able to see you, my mother will oppose the interview. But come by all means, and I will see you if possible. If not, you will understand that I have failed in my endeavours to help you."

"To-morrow may decide our fate," I said.

"It may," she replied. "Our destiny is in Mrs. Mervyn's hands. A word from her might remove the bar to our happiness. And yet, I fear, the word will never be uttered."

There was a pause, after which Apphia said: "Strange, that gipsy woman told me I should be suddenly summoned hence — and should go! I didn't believe her at the moment — but it has come to pass, you see."

"Strange, indeed!" I replied, thoughtfully.

Little more passed between us, for though I tried to assume a hopeful confidence, I could not help secretly sharing Apphia's misgivings, and almost dreaded lest some fresh calamity might be at hand.

The messenger who had brought the post-chaise proved to be the ill-favoured Fabyan Lowe, and aware that this man was devoted to Mrs. Brideoake, and would report all he heard and saw to her, I was careful in bidding Apphia adieu to make no allusion to my expectation of seeing her again on the morrow. Brother and sister having got into the post-chaise, it drove off, the postilion being ordered to proceed in the first instance to Weverham, Apphia having some few preparations to make for the sudden journey.

I then returned to the green, but the fête no longer afforded me any amusement, and it was mainly owing to the untiring exertions of Miss Hazilrigge and her niece that it was brought to a satisfactory close. The gipsy women were still there, but I strove in vain to obtain a word in private with Rue. Her mother's vigilance was not to be baffled.

An hour before the fête broke up, I looked round for the pair again, and not seeing them, ascertained that they had just left. Ned Culcheth had also disappeared.

The fête concluded at eight o'clock. Many of my rustic guests of either sex would have liked it to be prolonged, I make no doubt, but I did not care to gratify their inclinations, and as soon as the more important guests had taken their departure, I withdrew, leaving it to Mr. Ponder to announce the close of the festivities. On a hint from him, delivered with his customary politeness, the company began to disperse immediately, and in less than an hour the green was as quiet as it had been on the previous evening, all traces of the entertainment having disappeared.

I must not omit to mention that, in taking leave of me, Major Atherton said very kindly, that he should be delighted to be of service to me, if I would show him how — and he trusted I would consider him in the light of an old friend: “In that character, let me observe,” he said, “that I think Apphia Brideoake a very charming girl — worthy of a life’s devotion — and I sincerely hope you may obtain her hand.”

I thanked him heartily for his friendly offers and good wishes, and we parted.

About nine o’clock on that same night I mounted my horse, and started on my expedition to Cottonborough, where I hoped to arrive by midnight. The few things I took with me were placed in my saddle-bags. Had I been free from anxiety, I should have greatly enjoyed my ride. But black care followed me like a shadow, and would not be dismissed. The night was fine and not dark, for though the moon was invisible, the deep vault was without a cloud, and thickly studded with stars. The roads were in good order, and I trotted on at a brisk pace, and almost without stoppage, until I neared Dunton Park.

Arrived at the foot of the hill which is crowned by those lordly woods, I drew in the rein, and was proceeding leisurely along, when I heard the clatter of horse’s hoofs, and soon afterwards perceived a man galloping towards me. Something must have caught the animal’s foot, for he suddenly stumbled and threw his rider. Fearing mischief might have occurred, I rode forward, but ere I got to the spot, the man had regained his legs, and remounted his horse. I expressed a hope that he was not hurt, but he answered in a most uncourteous tone, “What is that to you, sir? Go on your way.”

It was Malpas Sale. My enemy had already recognised me. After addressing me in the rude manner I have described,

he would have ridden off, but I caught hold of his rein, and forcibly detained him.

"Stay!" I thundered. "Chance has brought us together, and we do not part till you have rendered me an account of your villanous proceedings."

"This language to me, sir!" he cried, foaming with rage. "You must be drunk, or mad. Leave go the rein at once — or —"

"You shall not stir, I tell you," I rejoined, in a determined tone, "till you have rendered me an account of your infamous transactions with Simon Pownall. I know the errand on which you are come from Windsor. It is to buy the will from Pownall — the will constituting me heir to our uncle's property."

"Who told you this?" he demanded.

"No matter whence my information is derived," I rejoined — "it is correct. But I will take such steps as will effectually stop your nefarious design."

"Take any steps you please, sir," he rejoined, scornfully. "I defy you."

"You are over-confident, methinks, with such a peril as this hanging over your head," I remarked.

"There is no peril hanging over my head," he replied, with contemptuous audacity. "My position is perfectly secure, and it is not in your power, or in the power of any living person, to shake it. Mark what I say, and ponder upon it. I am beyond dispute — beyond dispute, I repeat, sir — heir to our uncle Mobberley's property."

And he again laughed defiantly.

"Then you would give me to understand that the nefarious transaction has been completed," I cried — "that you have

obtained possession of the will which was fraudulently purloined by Simon Pownall. Is it so? Speak out, without equivocation."

"I *will* speak — if only to annihilate your hopes," he rejoined. "No witnesses are present, so it matters not what passes between us. Learn then, to your confusion, that the precious document, on which your castles in the air have been built, is destroyed — destroyed, I say. All evidence is for ever removed. How say you now, sir? Will the property be yours or mine? — ha! ha!"

My hold of the rein involuntarily relaxed, and, finding himself free, he awaited no reply, but striking his horse sharply with the whip, galloped off, leaving me utterly confounded.

CHAPTER V.

In which I appear in a new character.

SOME minutes elapsed before I recovered from the stupefaction into which I had been thrown by Malpas's startling declaration; and by this time the sound of his horses's hoofs had died away in the distance. I did not attempt to follow him, but while pursuing my journey towards Cottonborough, I set myself deliberately to examine the probability of his astounding statement. Little inclined as I was to credit it, I could not but fear that it might be correct. A falsehood of such magnitude could scarcely have been advanced without premeditation, and with such unparalleled audacity. Neither, unless he had felt perfectly secure, would he have ventured to defy me so insolently. No, no! he must have obtained possession of the will, and have destroyed it, as he had affirmed.

And yet, on the other hand, it was difficult to conceive how the bargain had been so expeditiously concluded between him and the rapacious scoundrels with whom he must have had to deal. How had their demands been satisfied? Pownall had declared in my hearing that he was resolved to have a large sum, and his confederates would be little less extortionate. Malpas was not overstocked with money. Rather the reverse, I fancied. How, at a moment's notice, on his arrival from Windsor, had he managed to raise the funds necessary to complete the iniquitous transaction? Promises to pay, written or otherwise, were not likely to serve his turn

with crafty rascals like Pownall and his associates. It must be cash down with them. Since this was certain, how was the money procured?

There was another view of the case. The robber might himself have been plundered. Pownall might have been tricked out of his expected gains. Phaleg and his son had plotted to steal the will, and might have succeeded in their design. But admitting this latter supposition to be the true one, the difficulty of the purchase-money was not removed. Sold the will must have been by Pownall or the gipsies: in either case it must have been well paid for. Again, the question arose — where did the money come from?

The answer must be given by Malpas. His enforced reply must needs throw some light upon the mysterious affair, and lead very probably to his detection. If it could be proved that he had borrowed a large sum at this particular juncture, he must either produce the money, or show that it had been lawfully expended. Again, his accomplices would find it difficult to conceal their spoil. Through them the dark plot might be unravelled. Pownall's meditated flight to America must be prevented, and the gipsies be placed under the surveillance of the police.

Meditations, such as these, occupied me during my ride to Cottonborough. Five miles off, the town became distinguishable through the darkness by its many-twinkling lights. As I advanced, these lights increased in number and brilliancy, until I began to fancy there must be a general illumination in the town. But it was only the cotton-mills lighted up for night-work. Where toil ceases not during the twenty-four hours, gas cannot be stinted, and it is largely consumed in the Cottonborough factories. The huge, ugly fabrics glistened like fairy palaces. But it was with more

sorrow than admiration that I regarded them as I rode past.

I put up at the Palace Inn that night, as was my wont.

Next morning, at ten o'clock precisely, as I had appointed with Apphia, I was in waiting near the garden-gate of the Anchorite's. I did not ring the bell, or give any intimation of my arrival, but patiently awaited the appearance of Mr. Comberbach. At last he came. The gate was partly opened, and the butler, peeping out, beckoned me to him. My first inquiries were whether any improvement had taken place in Mrs. Mervyn's health.

"She is rayther better, thankee, sir, but still dangerously ill," Mr. Comberbach replied. "Yesterday, we all of us thought the poor dear lady was going to pop off the shelf altogether; but she has rallied a little since then. The sight of dear Miss Apphia did her a world of good, and she slept tolerably well last night, and awoke somewhat easier this morning."

"I must see her, Comberbach," I cried. "I know you can manage to get me into her room, if you choose."

"You give me credit for a great deal more power than I possess," he replied. "It would have been an easy matter once, but now your humble servant is of small account at the Anchorite's. However, a plan has occurred to me, or rayther, I should say, it was suggested by Molly Bailey — for accomplishing the desired object. But it's very hazardous — very hazardous, indeed, sir."

"I care not. I will adopt it," I exclaimed.

"You mistake me, sir," he replied. "I mean that the plan is hazardous to me and Molly Bailey, and may occasion the loss of our places."

"I should be truly sorry for such a result as that," I said.

"But you must not run so great a risk for nothing. Divide that with Molly Bailey." And I placed a five pound note in his hands.

"Excessively obleeged to you, sir, I'm sure," he replied, bowing. "Molly and I always say you are a very generous young gentleman, and deserve support. I'll try and get you into the room. But you must be extremely cautious, and not say a word, if you can help it, while Mrs. B. is by. Molly Bailey will use her best endeavours to 'get her out of the room for a short time, so as to give you an opportunity of saying a word to our poor dear lady."

"That is all I require, Comberbach," I cried. "And you and Molly may depend upon my gratitude if I can set matters right."

"Well, I hope you may, sir; but I'm not remarkably sanguine," he replied, shaking his head. "Mind, if you're discovered, Mrs. B. must never learn who let you in."

"She shan't learn it from me, you may depend, Comberbach," I replied.

Satisfied with this assurance, he allowed me to pass through the gate, and directed me to make my way through a side walk, which was screened by a shrubbery, to the back of the house; begging me not to leave the covert of the trees until I heard him cough. I complied with his instructions, and was soon summoned from my place of concealment by the signal, when I perceived him standing at an open door. In another moment I was in his pantry.

"And now the plan, Comberbach!" I cried. "What is it?"

"I don't know that you'll altogether approve of it, sir," he replied. "It's Molly Bailey's idea, not mine. You will have to personate Captain Sale."

"Personate him!" I exclaimed, in disgust. "Ridiculous! I shall do nothing of the sort."

"I knew you would object, sir," he replied; "but there's no help. The part must be adopted, or your errand here will be fruitless. Mrs. B. has received a letter from the captain — so Molly Bailey tells me — announcing that he will be here to-day. Consequently Mrs. B. won't be surprised by your appearance."

"Nonsense, man, she will instantly recognise me," I cried, hastily.

"I don't think so, sir," he answered. "My poor dear lady's chamber is darkened, and Mrs. B. generally sits at the further side of the bed — so if you are careful you won't be detected. Luckily, Captain Sale left a suit of clothes behind when he was last here. If you will condescend to put them on, you'll look just like him."

And as he spoke, he opened a press, and took out a braided, military-looking frock-coat, and some other habiliments, which I recognised as belonging to Malpas.

"Here you are, sir!" he cried. "Put on this coat and you'll be the captain himself. Doctor Sale wouldn't know the difference — though he might think his son improved. I'll remain outside while you make the change. Call me when you're ready."

With this he left me, closing the door after him.

My dislike to the part I was about to assume was overcome by the results that might possibly ensue from the scheme; and I felt that if I missed this opportunity of gaining admittance to Mrs. Mervyn, another might not occur. Hastily throwing off my attire, I proceeded to put on the dress laid out for me, and in a few minutes the metamorphosis was complete. Malpas being about my height, and nearly of the same make, his apparel fitted me exactly, and when Mr.

Comberbach shortly afterwards came in, he exclaimed, with a laugh, "You'll do, sir! If I had met you as you are now, I should have thought you were Captain Sale. Now you must take the trouble to go back to the garden-gate by the same way you came here — then ring the bell — and I'll be with you in a trice. This will prevent any suspicion on the part of Fabyan Lowe, or of Mrs. B. herself, if she should happen to see you. Here, take the captain's foraging cap, sir, and keep your handkerchief to your face as you come towards the house."

Obeying his instructions to the letter, I returned to the garden-gate, and rang a lusty peal, as if I had just arrived. Mr. Comberbach almost instantly answered the summons, and smiled approval. As he preceded me along the broad gravel-walk, I kept my handkerchief to my face, and adopted, as nearly as I could, the airy gait of Malpas. As we approached the house, Fabyan Lowe presented himself, but, without giving the prying rascal time to address me, the butler hurried forward, and bade him take word to Mrs. Mervyn that Captain Sale had arrived. The ill-favoured manservant, evidently suspecting nothing, departed on his errand without delay, and Mr. Comberbach ushered me up-stairs to the library, where he left me. I was under great apprehension lest Mrs. Brideoake might come forth to speak to me; and my relief was proportionate when, as the inner door opened, instead of the Gorgon visage I apprehended, I beheld the good-humoured countenance of Molly Bailey.

"Please to step this way, Captain Sale," Molly said, smiling significantly at me. "Mrs. Mervyn will see you, sir. Thank goodness, she is better this morning — much better! Mrs. Brideoake is with her, and Miss Apphia. This way, captain."

Summoning up all my resolution, I followed her with gentle tread. Crossing a passage, she paused before a partly-open door, which I knew to be that of Mrs. Mervyn's chamber, and said, in a tone calculated to be heard by those within, "Make as little noise as you can, captain, and speak very low. My missis is easily disturbed."

With this she pushed the door gently open, and I stepped softly into the sick lady's chamber.

CHAPTER VI.

Showing what success attended the stratagem.

As I had been apprised by the butler, the apartment was so much darkened that the chances were against my immediate detection. The window-curtains were closely drawn, and the only light afforded was from a small shaded lamp, placed on the table in a remote corner of the room, near to which Mrs. Brideoake was seated.

Keeping out of the influence of this lamp, I gently approached the poor sufferer, who was propped up on her couch by pillows. She looked very feeble and attenuated, but held out her hand kindly as I drew near. I bent over her, as well to hide my emotion as to conceal my features from Mrs. Brideoake, and in a low tone expressed my satisfaction at finding her somewhat better. Apphia had been seated near her, but moved away on my entrance, supposing me to be Malpas.

"I am thankful you are come, Malpas," she said, feebly. "I much desired to speak with you relative to your engagement with this dear girl."

"What of it, madam?" I inquired, in a low tone, trembling with emotion.

"Answer me, Malpas," she said. "Are you still in the same mind? Do you really wish the contract to be fulfilled?"

"Why make these strange inquiries, dear Mrs. Mervyn?" Mrs. Brideoake said, rising from her seat, and approaching the foot of the bed. "No change, I am convinced, can have

taken place in Malpas's sentiments towards my daughter; neither can he desire to break the solemn engagement into which he has entered with her. Why should you suppose so?"

"Do not be cross with me," Mrs. Mervyn returned. "I only want an assurance from the young people that they continue attached to each other."

"Take the assurance from me, dear madam," Mrs. Brideoake said. "They do."

Apphia uttered an exclamation of dissent, which caught the ears of the sick lady.

"What is that you say, child?" she cried, quickly. "Have you any objection to make? If so, speak! You know how anxious I am for your happiness."

"She has none, madam — she has none," Mrs. Brideoake rejoined, glancing menacingly at her daughter.

"Come hither, my dear," Mrs. Mervyn cried. And as Apphia timidly approached, she turned towards her, and said, "I may not be long spared to you, and indeed I had begun to fear I should never behold you again; but my prayers have been granted, and I have you beside me once more. During my illness something has whispered to me that you are unhappy, and repent of your engagement with Malpas. If it be so, it is not too late to retreat. Do not let any consideration prevent you from avowing the truth."

"You distress me, and you distress Apphia by these doubts, my dear Mrs. Mervyn," Mrs. Brideoake hastily interposed. "My daughter is not so fickle as you imagine her; and as to retreating from her engagement, you may rest perfectly satisfied she will never do anything of the sort. She will not venture to contradict me, I am sure," she added, gazing steadfastly at Apphia.

"But speak, my dear child — speak!" Mrs. Mervyn cried. "Let me have the answer I require from your own lips. Do you really love this young man?"

Thus exhorted, Apphia might have confessed the real nature of her sentiments in regard to Malpas; but, as I looked up at the moment, our eyes met, and she recognised me.

"Yes, madam, I really do love him," she said.

Mrs. Brideoake, who had doubtless expected a very different response, appeared surprised and greatly relieved.

"I hope you are convinced now, my dear Mrs. Mervyn," she said, "though I do not see why my assertion should have been doubted."

"But what says the young gentleman?" Mrs. Mervyn cried. "Surely, there is no drawing back on his part?"

"None whatever, dear Mrs. Mervyn," Apphia exclaimed, eagerly. "I will answer for him."

Mrs. Brideoake looked still more astonished, and smiled approvingly on her daughter.

"Well, my dears," Mrs. Mervyn said, "I am truly glad to find that my misgivings have been groundless. Had it been otherwise, I meant to — but it is scarcely worth while now to state what my intentions were."

"Not in the least necessary, my dear madam," Mrs. Brideoake said.

"Oh! do pray let me hear them?" Apphia cried.

Her mother looked at her, and slightly frowned.

"Well, then, since you desire it so much, I will tell you," Mrs. Mervyn said: "I had fully determined to revoke a certain deed of settlement which I had made in your favour, but which ties you to marry one particular person — namely, him to whom you are engaged, Malpas Sale. The condition was made at your mother's request, and I had begun to fear, as I

have just stated, that I had done wrong in making it; but you have now set my mind entirely at rest on that score."

"And you had resolved to set me free, my dear Mrs. Mervyn?" she exclaimed, joyfully. "How shall I thank you?"

"But you do not want to be set free, my dear?" Mrs. Mervyn cried, in surprise. "If you retain your regard for Malpas, and mean to fulfil your engagement with him, what need of any change in the conditions? I would not fetter your inclinations, but since your choice is made, where can be the harm of allowing the restriction to continue?"

"It is a very proper restriction," Mrs. Brideoake cried, "and I would not have it removed on any account."

"I am perfectly aware of your feeling on the subject, my dear madam," Mrs. Mervyn said, "and I yielded to it at the time, as you know, though I thought the condition imposed upon your daughter rather hard. You are quite content with what I have done, my dear?" she added to Apphia.

I could not have helped giving utterance to the feelings that overpowered me, if Apphia had not spoken.

"Quite content, dear madam," she replied, in a low tone.

"And you?" Mrs. Mervyn said, addressing me.

"How can he be otherwise than content with you, madam, since you have secured him a rich wife?" Mrs. Brideoake said.

At this moment Molly Bailey gently entered the room, and signified to Mrs. Brideoake that she was wanted. After delivering this message, she retired, directing an expressive glance at me. Mrs. Brideoake followed her almost immediately, recommending the dear invalid to our attention during her absence.

Apphia and I were thus left alone with Mrs. Mervyn. The moment I had so anxiously desired was come. Yet how to

profit by it? The utmost caution was necessary, for I knew that a sudden shock might be fatal to the poor lady.

"Have you anything further to say to me, my love?" Mrs. Mervyn inquired kindly of Apphia.

"Yes, madam, I have something of importance to say to you," Apphia replied, "which I did not like to mention while my mother was by. I am sure you will pardon me when you know all — but I wish that deed of settlement, which you referred to just now, could be burnt."

"You wish it burnt, my dear! — why so, pray?" Mrs. Mervyn demanded.

"Because — oh! forgive me, dear Mrs. Mervyn," Apphia exclaimed — "because I never can comply with its conditions. I never can marry Malpas Sale."

"I am lost in astonishment! You say this to his face? What must he think of you?"

"Compose yourself, my dear madam, and you shall know all," Apphia rejoined. "A deception has been practised upon you, but I trust you will think it venial. Whom do you imagine is near you?"

"Is it not Malpas Sale?" Mrs. Mervyn cried, trembling.

"It is Mervyn Clitheroe, who has put on this disguise in order to approach you," Apphia said. "It is on his account that I wish the settlement to be committed to the flames."

"I see it all now," Mrs. Mervyn rejoined, faintly. "I thought his conduct strange. Give me the scent-bottle quickly, or I shall faint."

"You forgive me, my dear Mrs. Mervyn, for the stratagem I have practised, but I had no other means of gaining access to you," I cried.

"Yes — yes — I forgive you," she answered, pressing my hand gently.

A crisis in my fate had arrived. Oh! how I dreaded lest

Mrs. Brideoake should return before the needful explanation could take place. Mrs. Mervyn herself seemed to feel equal uneasiness, for she said in a low tone to Apphia, "My dear, is your mother coming back soon? I hope not — I hope not."

"Are you able to listen to me, dear Mrs. Mervyn?" I asked. Again she pressed my hand gently, and I went on: "Before saying aught of myself, let me tell you how entirely deceived you are in regard to Malpas Sale. He is not what you suppose him. I will not characterise him as strongly as I ought for fear of shocking you; neither will I pain you by a detail of his evil doings — but let me say in a word that he is utterly unworthy of Apphia."

"Then he shall never have her," Mrs. Mervyn cried. "It will be a difficult task to persuade Mrs. Brideoake that he is as bad as you represent him, and in my present state I cannot attempt it. But at any rate, the match shall not take place."

"Oh! thank you, madam, for that promise!" Apphia cried, with a look of inexpressible gratitude.

"Why did you not appeal to me before, my dear?" Mrs. Mervyn replied, in a tone of tender reproach. "You know that my chief desire is to contribute to your future happiness."

"I did not dare to do so, madam."

"Alas! alas!" the poor lady exclaimed, with a look of great distress, mingled with self-reproach, "I have been much to blame. I ought to have seen with my own eyes, and not with the eyes of others. But you forgive me I am sure. And you too, my dear Mervyn," she added to me, "I fear I have done you great injustice."

"You have done me injustice only if you have supposed me wanting in gratitude and affection to you, madam," I replied. "But you make ample amends by your present kindness."

"I will make all the amends I can for the error I have un-

intentionally committed," she said. "Tell me what you would have me do, my dear," she added to Apphia.

"The greatest favour you can confer upon me, dear Mrs. Mervyn, will be to destroy that deed of settlement," Apphia said.

"I will do something better than that," the kind lady replied. "I won't destroy it, but I will substitute another name for that of Malpas Sale, and make it imperative upon you to marry the person I shall designate. You understand me, I see. Nay, no thanks. I don't know what your mother will say to me. But I must bear the brunt of her displeasure as well as I can. It shall be done at once. The deed is in yonder closet. Fetch it me, Apphia, and I will make the needful alteration before Mrs. Brideoake returns."

"Why should you heed her, dear Mrs. Mervyn?" I cried. "If you have resolved to perform this generous action, she cannot prevent you, and she must be made aware of it sooner or later."

"That's true," the kind lady replied; "but I would rather she didn't know it just now. We should have a frightful scene. But we are losing time in talking. Where have I put my keys?"

"They are usually placed under your pillow," Apphia observed, searching for them as she spoke. "Yes, here is the black silk bag containing them."

"And here is the key of the closet," Mrs. Mervyn said, giving it to her. "You will find the deed in the little case of drawers with some other papers — the third drawer from the top, I think." And as Apphia flew to execute her orders, the good lady said to me, "There are writing materials on that table, Mervyn — bring me a pen. And draw back the curtains and let some light into the room, that we may see what we are about."

I hastened to obey her, praying internally that Mrs. Brideoake might not arrive to interrupt us. After drawing back the window-curtains as directed, I was proceeding to take up the other articles she required, when Apphia called out from the closet that she had opened all the drawers, but could not discover the deed.

"Not discover it!" Mrs. Mervyn cried. "It must be there. Search more carefully, child. I am sure I put it in the third drawer."

"Perhaps this may be it," Apphia cried, coming forth with a packet tied with red tape in her hand. "But it does not seem to relate to me."

"Yes, yes — that's it!" Mrs. Mervyn cried, eagerly. "Give it me directly, my dear. There's no occasion for you to read it."

And so eager was she to obtain possession of the packet, that she leaned forward and almost snatched it from Apphia. She then proceeded to untie the tape, and, taking out the deed, motioned us to stand aside, while she examined it in order to find out the place where the alteration in the name ought to be made. Having succeeded in her object, she bade me give her the pen, and she had scarcely taken it from me, when the door was gently opened, and Mrs. Brideoake entered, followed by Dr. Foam. The pen dropped from the poor lady's grasp, and she sank back, swooning, upon the pillow.

CHAPTER VII.

I am worsted, and driven ingloriously from the Field.

FULL light being now admitted into the room, Mrs. Brideoake at once recognised me. Her surprise and consternation were so great that she started back, and nearly upset Doctor Foam, who was close behind her. The spectacle, however, presented by poor Mrs. Mervyn in her fainting condition saved me from the torrent of her wrath which must otherwise have fallen upon my devoted head.

"What has happened?" Mrs. Brideoake cried, rushing towards the bed. "You have killed the poor lady between you. Ha!" she exclaimed, noticing the deed of settlement, as it had fallen from Mrs. Mervyn's grasp, "I see what you have been about. Cunning dissemblers as you both are, you have failed in accomplishing your artful design. Henceforth, this shall remain in my keeping."

And she snatched up the deed as she spoke.

By this time Doctor Foam had come up to the bed, and looking at Mrs. Brideoake in a manner that showed he would not be disobeyed, he said, "I insist upon your giving up that document to me, madam —"

"But, doctor —" she cried, as if disposed to resist him.

"I will have it," he continued; "and as opposition will be useless, you had better yield with a good grace, and not force me to take it from you. Nay, madam," he added, as he picked up the deed, which she tossed towards him, and put it into his pocket, "your anger is wasted on me. I am simply

discharging my duty to my dear patient. It is evident that she intended to make some alteration in this document; but sudden faintness must have prevented the execution of her design."

"It is fortunate that it did so," Mrs. Brideoake returned. "Advantage has been taken of my poor friend's enfeebled state to endeavour to make her annul her own deliberate act; but luckily the scheme, however well contrived, has failed."

"That may be so, or it may not, for I won't stop to discuss the matter with you now, madam," Doctor Foam rejoined. "On my dear patient's restoration to sensibility I shall deliver the deed to her, and it will then be for her to do with it as she pleases."

"Very proper indeed, doctor," Mrs. Brideoake sneered; "but you will find that while I am by to counsel her, dear Mrs. Mervyn will never commit such an error as to introduce Mr. Mervyn Clitheroe's name into that deed of settlement. For that was the object aimed at I am persuaded," she continued, glancing irefully at me — "that was what brought Mr. Clitheroe here — in this disguise. What must the nature of the design be when such artifices as this are resorted to? What must Mr. Clitheroe's notions of gentlemanlike conduct be when he can put on the very attire of the person whom he is seeking clandestinely to supersede? I blush to think that my daughter should have abetted his base scheme — but it is enough that it has failed."

"No more of this intemperate language, madam," Doctor Foam said; "whether your daughter has acted properly or the reverse — cannot be discussed now. If you have the regard you profess for Mrs. Mervyn, you will hold your tongue, and assist me to revive her, but if you attempt any further violence, I tell you plainly, madam, I shall order you out of the room."

"This to me, Doctor Foam?" the incensed lady cried.

"Bah!" cried the doctor, snapping his fingers. "Sit down on that chair and calm yourself. Throw the window wide open, Mervyn, and let us have plenty of fresh air. And do you, Apphia, let our patient inhale the spirits of hartshorn while I bathe her temples. We shall bring her round presently. I knew it!" he exclaimed, after a short interval, during which he and Apphia continued unremitting in their efforts, "she revives."

Heaving a deep sigh, Mrs. Mervyn opened her eyes, and looking at Apphia, said, in a low tone, "Where is he? — where is my boy?"

"I am here, madam," I replied, advancing towards the bed.

"Ah! yes, I see you, my dear," she cried, in the kindest tone imaginable. "You shall both be made happy. I shall never live to see you united, but united you shall be. I have done all you desire, have I not? I have changed the name in the deed of settlement. It only now remains to obtain your mother's consent to the marriage, and I am sure she will not refuse."

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Mervyn," Mrs. Brideoake said, rising from her seat. "I *do* refuse — peremptorily refuse my consent. You are mistaken, also, in supposing that you have made any change in the settlement. Happily, you have not done Malpas Sale the great injustice of superseding him for an unworthy rival. Neither, if I have any influence with you, will you do so. Do not listen to the false representations of this designing young man, but attend to me. Naturally I must have my daughter's welfare and happiness at heart, but I should consult neither the one nor the other if I gave her to Mervyn Clitheroe. If after this Apphia marries him, she will

marry in opposition to my wishes and injunctions, and will violate her solemn promise to me."

"What is this I hear?" Mrs. Mervyn cried. "Have you given a promise to your mother not to marry without her consent, Apphia?"

"Alas! madam, I have," she replied.

"Oh! this is truly unfortunate! — truly unfortunate!" the poor lady groaned, sinking back upon the pillow.

Her looks frightened Doctor Foam so much that he hurried to the table for some fresh restoratives, saying to Mrs. Brideoake, as he passed her, "You see what mischief you have done, madam. Will nothing keep you quiet? You will compel me to put my threats into execution."

"Do as you please, Doctor Foam," she rejoined. "On you will rest the responsibility of any outrage. Force only shall make me leave the room while this young man remains in it."

"Zounds, madam! you are enough to make one forget the respect due to your sex and your station," Doctor Foam cried. "I won't answer for the consequences if my dear patient is further excited. There is no help for it, Mervyn," he added to me, "go you must." And as he led me towards the door, he whispered, "But don't leave the house. Stay in the library. I will join you there anon."

I glanced towards the bed, and saw Mrs. Mervyn still almost inanimate, with Apphia tending her. I glanced towards Mrs. Brideoake, who had resumed her seat with a look of exultation at my defeat. She pointed to the door, and I felt half inclined to mortify her by remaining, but an impatient gesture from Doctor Foam changed my design, and made me quit the room.

Never, alas! to see my dear friend and benefactress again.

CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Comberbach has gloomy forebodings.

ANXIOUS to get rid of the hateful attire in which I was disguised without a moment's loss of time, on entering the library I rang the bell, and the summons being answered by Comberbach, I explained my wishes to him, and he conducted me to a dressing-room, where he said he had placed my apparel. The change of habiliments was speedily effected, and as I issued from the dressing-room, very much more at my ease, I encountered the butler, who now inquired how I had prospered in my interview with his mistress.

"I trust Mrs. B. didn't find you out, sir?" he said. "If so, there'll be a pretty kettle of fish!"

I was obliged to confess that the stratagem had been discovered, but I consoled the terrified butler by saying that I felt sure Mrs. Brideoake would not visit her anger upon him, as she had too much upon her mind just now.

"I hope it may prove so," he rejoined; "but you don't know what Mrs. B. is like when she's really put out of temper. Oh! Mr. Mervyn," he added, with a groan, "what a change there is in this house to be sure, sir. It hasn't been like the same place since that woman set foot in it; and instead of getting better, things are likely to get worse. We shan't have our dear missis long, and when she's gone, what's to become of me and Molly Bailey? We can't live with Mrs. B., you know. But it will be a sore trial to both of us to leave the old place where we have dwelt so long."

"Most sincerely do I hope, on all accounts, that you won't be obliged to leave it, Comberbach," I said.

"It will be a sad day, indeed, for us, when Mrs. B. is undisputed missis of this house, Mr. Mervyn," the butler continued, sighing dismally.

"Why do you entertain that notion, Comberbach?" I asked. "Even if you should unhappily lose your dear mistress, it doesn't follow that she will be succeeded by Mrs. Brideoake."

"It follows as naturally as night follows day," he rejoined. "However much things may be kept secret, servants generally have an inkling as to what's going on; and I have tolerably correct information, that if Mrs. B. survives my dear missis, the Anchorite's, and all belonging to it, will be hers."

"You don't say so, Comberbach?" I cried, staring at him.

"Yes I do say it, sir, and I'll stand by it," he replied, confidently.

"Not before Mrs. Brideoake," I rejoined. "What can be the cause of the extraordinary influence that this lady has acquired over your mistress, Comberbach?"

"Don't question me on that subject, sir," he rejoined, in alarm. "I daren't answer you. I wish with all my heart she had never come near the place! It would have been better for my missis — better for you — better for me and Molly Bailey — better for everybody — except herself. Stay, sir! You are not going back to the library?" he added, noticing that I was proceeding in that direction.

"Yes I am," I replied. "No further harm can be done by my staying here, since Mrs. Brideoake is aware that I am in the house."

The butler evidently would have preferred my immediate departure, but he raised no further objection, and I entered the library and sat down. Nearly half an hour elapsed before Dr. Foam made his appearance, and I drew an unfavourable augury from his extremely serious looks.

"Mrs. Mervyn is worse, I fear, doctor?" I said.

"I am sorry to tell you she is," he replied. "I have only quitted her for a moment to speak to you. Go to my house, and remain there till I return. I have no time now to enter upon a subject which I desire to mention to you."

"Can I not see Mrs. Mervyn again?"

"Not to-day," he replied. "It will be useless to wait here with any such expectation. To-morrow, perhaps — but I can answer for nothing. I have sent for Mrs. Mervyn's professional adviser, Mr. Tester. The poor lady contemplates some new arrangements in regard to the disposition of her property, and they must be made without delay."

"Then you think danger is imminent?" I said.

"Nothing must be neglected," he replied, equivocally. "As to your seeing Mrs. Mervyn again to-day, it is out of the question. Until this matter of business is settled I do not wish her to be disturbed. Besides, the Sales are expected here immediately, and it may be disagreeable to you to meet them. You will find a friend at my house whom you will be pleased to meet, and I shall expect to see you both on my return. Good-by, for the present."

With this he left me, and as it appeared certain that I should gain nothing by remaining longer where I was, but in all probability might expose myself to annoyance, I acted upon his advice, and went down stairs at once, with the intention of quitting the house.

I found Mr. Comberbach in the hall, in a very despondent state indeed. Molly Bailey had brought word that his mistress

was worse. Fabyan Lowe had been sent off in haste for Mr. Tester — a proof to Comberbach that the doctor thought her end approaching. "Heaven grant she means to make a change in her will!" the butler cried; "and if so, I hope the lawyer won't be too late. I wish I was permitted to advise her. I know who should have the largest share of her property — and who the least." In taking leave of him, I told him I should be there again on the morrow; on which he answered, in a very doleful tone, "All will be over before that, I fear, sir."

On arriving at Cottonborough, I repaired at once to Dr. Foam's residence, which was in the centre of the town. After explaining my business to the servant, he told me that another gentleman was waiting for the doctor, and ushering me into the room where this person was, I found, to my great surprise, that it was no other than John Brideoake.

CHAPTER IX.

In which John Brideoake is made acquainted with his Family History
by Doctor Foam.

JOHN informed me that he had seen Doctor Foam on the previous evening, after taking Apphia to the Anchorite's, and the worthy physician had urged him so strongly to remain over the following day, alleging that he had an important communication to make to him, that he could not refuse; and he had now come to keep his appointment with the doctor.

"I am glad you stayed, on all accounts, John," I said. "Mrs. Mervyn is in an exceedingly critical state, and it may be necessary for you to consider what must be done, under such circumstances, with Apphia."

And I then proceeded to relate to him all that had occurred at the Anchorite's that morning. He listened to me with great attention, and expressed infinite concern that Mrs. Mervyn had been unable to carry out her kind intentions.

We were still occupied with this subject when Doctor Foam made his appearance. He at once relieved my anxiety respecting Mrs. Mervyn, by stating that she was somewhat better, and hoped that all immediate danger was over. However, he should see her again in a few hours, he said, and should then be better able to judge. Then turning to John Brideoake, he observed,

"I will now explain my object in begging you to come to me this morning. I am glad that Mervyn Clitheroe is also

present, as it is desirable he should hear what I have to communicate. Be seated, I beg of you, for I have much to say. You are little acquainted with your family history, I think? — indeed, I know you are not.”

“You are right, sir, I am entirely unacquainted with it,” John replied. “My mother has kept me completely in the dark both as to my father’s position in the world and her own. As I have heretofore intimated to Mervyn, I am by no means satisfied that I am really entitled to the very name I bear.”

Dr. Foam smiled.

“The time is come when you must be let into the secret,” he said; “and though I have no authority from your mother for making the disclosure, I am in no way bound to withhold it. It will doubtless surprise you to hear that you are of the same family as the mistress of the Anchorite’s, and consequently a connexion of your friend, Mervyn Clitheroe.”

“This is gratifying intelligence indeed!” I exclaimed.

“I must request your particular attention to my recital, or it may not be comprehensible,” Dr. Foam pursued. “Stuart Mervyn, who suffered for his participation in the unfortunate Rising of ’45, had two children. Fulke, father of the present Mrs. Mervyn, and Honoria. The latter was secretly married to a young nobleman devoted to the Jacobite cause, and who, as well as Stuart Mervyn, perished on the scaffold.”

“You refer to the unfortunate Lord Wilburton, I conclude, doctor?” I remarked. “I always understood that Honoria Mervyn’s connexion with that nobleman was not particularly creditable to her. I am glad to learn from you that her reputation is unsullied.”

“Indisputable proof of her marriage with Lord Wilburton exists,” Dr. Foam said.

"In what way does this concern me?" John inquired.

"You will perceive anon," the doctor rejoined. "At the time of Lord Wilburton's arraignment and condemnation, his unhappy lady expected to become a mother, and she died on the very day, and I believe on the very hour, that her lord's head fell upon the block. She died in giving birth to a son, who subsequently bore the name of Gerard Wilburton. Attainted of high treason, Lord Wilburton's honours were necessarily forfeited, and his marriage with Honoria Mervyn never having been acknowledged, nothing was done for his supposed illegitimate offspring. I shall not pause to trace the history of Gerard Wilburton, but will merely state that he married and had one son, Scrope — a remarkably handsome fellow, who, although he had neither wealth nor title to recommend him — won the affections of the youngest daughter of a noble house — the Lady Amicia Leyland, fourth daughter of the Earl of Rossendale. This young lady eloped with him, and they were married on the borders of Scotland, and the marriage was so displeasing to the proud earl her father, that he refused to see her again, and left the pair to starve. And well-nigh starve they did; for having little means of support, they were reduced to absolute penury. Six years after this marriage, the grandson of the unfortunate Lord Wilburton died, leaving a widow and two children wholly unprovided for. But destitute as was Lady Amicia's condition, she would have died rather than apply to her family for assistance. They had disowned her, she said, and unless recalled she would never go near them. Fancy a lady who inherited all the pride of one of the loftiest peers of the realm reduced to such a miserable state as I have described! But Lady Amicia Wilburton would never drag her title through the mire, she declared, and took the humbler designation of Mrs. Brideoake. Now, sir," the doctor continued, addressing John, "the last

Lord Wilburton was your great-grandsire, and if the title were restored you would bear it."

John made no reply, but seemed lost in thought.

"You must not forget that your great-grandame, Honoria, Lady Wilburton, was Mrs. Mervyn's aunt, and this fact will explain to you why the mistress of the Anchorite's (when made aware by me of the real circumstances of the case) should have taken so much interest in the so-called Mrs. Brideoake. I found all particulars of the secret marriage between Lord Wilburton and Honoria Mervyn detailed in the Jacobite correspondence entrusted to me some years ago by Mrs. Mervyn; and I have just succeeded in obtaining positive proofs of it, together with indubitable evidences of the lineal descent of Scrope Wilburton, your father, from the unfortunate Jacobite peer."

"I well recollect the circumstance you have mentioned, doctor," I said. "I felt certain at the time that you had made some singular discovery in that Jacobite correspondence. But I suppose Mrs. Brideoake, or, as I ought now to call her, Lady Amicia Wilburton, prevailed upon you to keep it a secret."

"You are right — she did," he replied.

During the progress of this narrative, I had narrowly watched John Brideoake's countenance, but though deeply interested, he manifested no elation. When Dr. Foam finished, he rose from his seat, and taking a turn or two about the room, as if weighing over what he had heard, approached the doctor, and pausing before him, said,

"You have made all clear as regards my family history, sir. But my mother's conduct appears wholly unaccountable."

"Her conduct is intelligible enough," Dr. Foam rejoined, "if the peculiarities of her character are taken into considera-

tion. Pride — unyielding pride — has been the mainspring of all her actions — except in the case of her marriage. Her father, the old Earl of Rossendale, is as proud as Lucifer, and so is her brother, Lord Leyland — so are all the house. Their reproaches on Lady Amicia's ill-assorted marriage, as they termed it, galled her deeply. The first few years of her wedded life were passed abroad. She then returned with her husband to England, and for some time lived in great distress in the neighbourhood of London; but no pressure of circumstances could induce Lady Amicia to apply to her father. After the birth of Apphia, the unfortunate pair removed to Hull, with the intention of proceeding to Edinburgh, but they never reached the latter place, for the seeds of consumption, long sown in Scrope Wilburton, now declared themselves, and in a few weeks he was gone. Then it was that, with the scantiest resources possible, poor Lady Amicia had to provide for herself and her children. But even though thus reduced she never for a moment thought of humbling herself to her father. Her hopes of reinstatement rested on her son —”

“I see it all now!” John cried. “Go on, sir.”

“Her hopes of reinstatement, as I have said, rested on her son. Even as a child he gave evidences of ability that led her to expect great subsequent distinction in him. After some debate she came to this town, where she knew there is an excellent free-school — rich in exhibitions and scholarships to both universities — one or more of which the youth might obtain, and so the door to future eminence would be opened to him.”

“I feel for her disappointment,” John cried, vainly striving to repress his emotion.

“Do not repine,” Dr. Foam said. “You did all your strength enabled you to do — too much, in fact. It was about

this time, if you remember, that, in attending you at Dr. Lonsdale's request, I saw your mother. I at once recognised her, for I had often seen her before at Lord Rossendale's seat, Buckrose, in Yorkshire, when she was the admired and haughty beauty, Lady Amicia Leyland. You may imagine my surprise at meeting her again under such strangely-altered circumstances. She imposed silence upon me by a look, and sympathising with her misfortunes, I obeyed the injunction. Subsequently, on imparting to her the discovery I had made in the Jacobite correspondence, I offered to introduce her to her connexion, Mrs. Mervyn. But her pride stood in her way, and she at first haughtily declined my well-meant proposal. In the end, however, as you know, her scruples were overruled, and she consented to become an inmate of the house. Then apparently new schemes of ambition dawned upon her. Disappointed in her son, upon whom her hopes of restoration to dignity and power had been fixed, she turned to her daughter. Doting upon Apphia, Mrs. Mervyn promised to give her half her property if she married according to her inclinations. You, Mervyn Clitheroe, were out of the way — you had given offence to Lady Amicia, and had made her your enemy — and you had been supplanted by Malpas Sale. By what arts Malpas had contrived to get into her ladyship's good graces I cannot say; but that he was successful, you have seen. The marriage was agreed upon — all was settled — when you returned, and it was broken off. But Lady Amicia still holds to Malpas, and will not give him up."

"A strange and most deplorable infatuation," John said.

"Strange indeed, and deplorable as strange!" Dr. Foam cried; "but her ladyship is as wilful and determined as she is haughty. She is a warm partisan, as Malpas has found; but a bitter enemy, as you, Mervyn, have discovered to your cost. Her dislike to you has become a rooted antipathy."

"How have I offended her?" I cried. "I cannot tax myself with showing her any disrespect."

"No doubt it was unintentional on your part," Dr. Foam replied; "but some offence must have been given, and she has keenly resented it. She also conceives that her children have been guilty of gross disobedience to her."

"Never, I solemnly declare, save when she has passed the limits of parental rule, have either of her children resisted her authority," John rejoined.

"Well, sir, you now know the precise position in which you stand," Dr. Foam said, after a short pause. "Let me state in addition, that I am firmly persuaded that your grandfather, Lord Rossendale, and your uncle, Lord Leyland, have influence enough to procure the restoration of your title."

"But at this moment, I suppose, neither of their lordships are aware of my existence," John said; "and I am not likely to remind them of it. Honours have no attraction for me, doctor, and if offered, I should reject them. I love a simple and retired life, and covet no distinction."

"Then you have no pride — no ambition, like your mother?" Dr. Foam said.

"None whatever," he replied — "surprising as it may appear to you."

"Still, though you look down with philosophic contempt on dignities and honours, you may desire to be placed in an easy position," Dr. Foam said. "I must now put your scruples to the test. Learn then, that it is good Mrs. Mervyn's intention to make a will in your favour; this will be done on my assurance that the old Jacobite title shall be revived in your person."

John shook his head, and was about to speak, but Dr. Foam interrupted him.

"Hear me out," he said. "This is no fanciful notion. I am confident that if this property comes to you, a reversal of the attainder can be procured, and that you will regain the honours of your ancestors."

"I should not wear them well," John replied, firmly. "I want nothing. If you have any influence with Mrs. Mervyn, urge her to pass me over altogether, and leave the property to my sister and Mervyn."

"This must not be, John," I said. "You owe it to the noble race from whom you are descended, and whose escutcheon has been thrown down, to restore their name to its original eminence."

"You fail to convince me," he rejoined, shaking his head.

"But there is one argument which I can employ," I said, drawing near to him, and speaking in a low tone, "and which ought to weigh with you. Once Lord Wilburton, Ora is yours."

A deep flush overspread his pallid features. A severe struggle was evidently going on in his breast.

"Possessed of this property, you can make an adequate provision for your mother, and above all, for your sister," Dr. Foam said; "and can bestow the hand of the latter on whomsoever you please."

"In the event now contemplated, that deed of settlement will not be acted upon, I presume, doctor?" I said.

"It will not be acted upon," he replied; "and for the best possible reason — because it is no longer in existence. Mr. Tester recommended its destruction; and destroyed it was accordingly in Mrs. Mervyn's presence. Now, sir," he added to John, "I await your decision."

"I consent," he replied. "I feel that I have no right to refuse an offer which may be advantageous to others, though it may entail discomfort upon myself."

"Wisely resolved," Doctor Foam cried. "Dear Mrs. Mervyn's last moments will be cheered by the conviction that an old title, lost in the Jacobite cause, may through her instrumentality be revived in the person of her relative. Poor lady! she is as much devoted to the good cause as ever. She has been brought up in Jacobite principles, and has maintained them through life; and in Jacobite principles she will die. And now as to the completion of the proposed arrangement. Mr. Tester is at present occupied in preparing the will for which he has received Mrs. Mervyn's instructions. It will be ready this afternoon, and at six o'clock he and I shall proceed to the Anchorite's. It will be proper for you to accompany us," he added to John; "Mrs. Mervyn may desire to see you. Till then, adieu! Having other matters to attend to, I must perforce dismiss you."

CHAPTER X.

John and I revisit our Old School, and pass a few hours in the Chetham Library. — Ill Tidings.

As we emerged from Dr. Foam's house, the din and confusion of the crowded street almost distracted John, who was in a state of great nervous excitement.

"Let us get out of this dreadful turmoil," he cried. "I am quite bewildered by what has just passed, and seem to be in a troubled dream."

"From which you will wake to wealth and rank," I replied. "Come with me, and I will take you where you will find the quiet you need."

And lending him the support of my arm, which he really needed, we walked on together, passing through St. Ann's-square and the market-place, and never halting till we reached the precincts of the noble old Collegiate Church. Without bestowing more than a momentary glance at this reverend structure, we crossed the churchyard, entered Long Mill-gate, and soon stood before the old school. Yes! there it was — there was the dear old F. G. S. — unchanged to all outward appearance since the days of our boyhood. How many recollections did the sight of this simple edifice — simple it was not in our eyes — conjure up! I saw John once more — a pale, sickly, shabbily-attired lad — and heard unfeeling gibes and taunts addressed to him. Little did those who jeered him for his mean habiliments and his half-starved looks reckon that he was of far more exalted birth than them-

selves! I saw myself — full of health, spirit, energy — hopeful of the future, contented with the present — and I felt that I could not, with entire regard to truth, say as much for myself now that I had become a man.

After gazing for some minutes at the exterior of the school, we passed through the gate, and stepped into the little court-yard — once so familiar to us, and so often trodden by our juvenile feet. From the open doors of the school came the buzz and hum of youthful voices, and I would fain have taken a peep inside; but John urged me to come away, and we proceeded to the Chetham Hospital, which I have already described as closely adjoining the Free Grammar School.

A wicket in the ancient stone gateway admitted us to the large quadrangular court used as a playground by Blue-coat Boys; and as we slowly crossed the wide area, my companion began to feel more at ease. The monastic and college-like air of the buildings around us delighted him. It was like coming home, he said. The happiest hours of his early life had been spent in the library we were about to visit. Entering at the low-browed door of the ancient hospital, snatching a glimpse at its huge kitchen, and passing the refectory, we ascended an oaken staircase, and gained a long gallery, with railed enclosures containing shelves full of venerable tomes.

In one of these nooks we found the librarian, a grave, elderly personage, attired in a rusty suit of sable, and John having obtained from him two folio volumes of the "*Patres Apostolici*," in Greek and Latin, while I contented myself with old Izaak Walton, we repaired to the reading-room, and finding it totally untenanted, seated ourselves at an ancient oak desk placed in the depths of an oriel window — John's favourite place of study in bygone days. Here we remained during the whole of the afternoon — sometimes reading — sometimes conversing in a low tone — but never interrupted,

for we were the sole occupants of the chamber. In this calm retreat John gradually regained his tranquillity, and when the deep bell of the old church struck four, warning us to depart, it was not without a pang that he quitted the place.

Our next step was to proceed to my hotel, where we partook of a little dinner, and our slender meal over, we went to Dr. Foam's residence. Afflicting news awaited us. Dr. Foam, it appeared, had been again hastily summoned to the Anchorite's by Mr. Comberbach, who had declared his conviction that his mistress would not live through the night. Before setting out, the doctor had left a few lines for John, begging him to await his return, and of course I bore my friend company.

For several hours we were kept in a state of most painful suspense, and it was past nine o'clock ere the doctor returned. He came into the room where we were at once, and, alarmed by his looks, I rushed towards him, entreating him to relieve my anxiety by a single word.

"Tell me she lives, doctor — that will suffice!" I exclaimed.

He shook his head mournfully.

"I am the bearer of ill tidings," he said.

"Shall I never behold her again?" I cried, in a voice of anguish.

"Not in this world," he rejoined, solemnly. "Dear Mrs. Mervyn has passed away from amongst us."

I sank backwards, and buried my face in my hands. I am not ashamed to own that I wept bitterly, for I had lost the best friend I had ever possessed — and one whom I dearly loved.

At last the worthy doctor came to me, and, after addressing a few consolatory remarks to me, said,

"Bear up manfully against this affliction. All your firm-

ness is needed. I have not yet exhausted my stock of bad news."

"What more remains?" I cried, looking inquiringly at him.

"You are chiefly concerned in what I have to tell," the doctor said, addressing John, who was nearly as profoundly affected as myself. "Mrs. Mervyn has not made the will I desired."

"All seems to go wrong at present!" I exclaimed, in a tone of deep disappointment.

"Compose yourself, my good young friend, and hear me out," Dr. Foam said, kindly. "Mr. Tester and I were too late. The will prepared to-day could not be executed, and a will, previously made, must, therefore, be acted upon. Lady Amicia Wilburton is now absolute and uncontrolled mistress of the Anchorite's and all belonging to it."

"Nothing left to Apphia? — nothing to John?" I cried.

"Nothing to any one — except to the lady I have named," Dr. Foam rejoined.

"Heaven be praised!" John exclaimed. "I have escaped this snare. Apphia shall return with me at once to Weverham."

"Do nothing rashly, I implore of you," Dr. Foam returned. "Weigh it well over, before you remove her entirely from her mother. You are now too well acquainted with Lady Amicia's character not to be aware of the consequences of such a step."

"I shall return to-night," I cried. "My business here is ended. Farewell, doctor!"

Dr. Foam made no attempt to detain me, but when John also rose to depart, he begged him to stay, saying he wished to have some further conversation with him.

CHAPTER XI.

Delamere Forest.

I HELD to my resolution, and notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, rode back that night to the mill. The exercise did me good. If I had retired to rest at Cottonborough, I should not have slept a wink. Mrs. Mervyn's death was a great shock to me, and the circumstances attending it made it doubly distressing. What might be in store for me I could not tell, but at present nothing but ill-luck attended me, and it seemed as if I was doomed to disappointment.

Next day, during the afternoon, I walked over to Weverham, to inquire after John and his sister, but nothing had been heard of them. I did not extend my walk to Owlarton Grange, for I was in no mood for society, and it would have been extremely painful to me to enter into a detail of the distressing events that had just occurred. Kind as friends may be, there are times when we shun them; and at this juncture I grieve to say that I felt like a misanthropist. But I did not indulge the feeling long.

On my return from Weverham, I found that a country lad had brought me a note from Ned Culcheth. The missive was rather strangely expressed and somewhat difficult to decipher, for Ned was not much skilled in penmanship, but I made out that he wished me to meet him at nine o'clock that night, at the Headless Cross, in Delamere Forest. He entered into no explanation as to the object of the meeting; but I felt sure that it was not for any trifling cause that he would summon

me. It is needless to say that I at once decided to go; and the many conjectures which the note gave rise to offered a reasonable distraction to my harassing thoughts.

Shortly after eight o'clock that evening I mounted my horse, and proceeded along the Tarporley road, in the direction of Delamere Forest. Though a general highway, the Tarporley road was little frequented at this hour, and I do not think, in the course of five or six miles which I traversed, that I encountered as many individuals.

The district I was approaching had a solitary character at all times. The well-cultivated land about Weverham, with its orchards, its rich pastures and large corn-fields, its thick hedgerows graced with numberless detached trees, its beautiful copses, its deep cloughs full of hazels, its homesteads and larger habitations, had given place to a sterile heath tract, only partially reclaimed and but thinly inhabited. For the last mile I had not discerned a single cottage. Plantations of Scotch firs and pines had succeeded the beech-trees, the oaks, and the elms, to be seen so frequently, and of such luxuriant growth, in the more favoured locality I had left behind, while the hedges had given place to rough palings or stone walls.

As I advanced, the country became even more dark and dreary-looking, being, in fact, little more than a black, boggy waste — perilous to any one who should attempt to cross it at night, from its numerous pitfalls, and treacherous quagmires and morasses. Whoso incautiously approached too near one of the latter would be infallibly engulfed in its oozy bed.

This black and sterile waste, which of the vast woods that had once covered it could only now boast a few stunted trees, was, in fact, the famous Delamere Forest. To me it had a special attraction, as being the scene of many of the strangely-

fulfilled prophecies of Robert Nixon. Weird traditions of all kinds were attached to it. In its coverts and thickets in olden days the royal hart had often been unharboured by the huntsman, and the wild boar speared; but all beasts of venery had long since vanished, and the only creature left, indigenous to the soil, was the rabbit that burrowed in the sand-banks. For centuries neglected and undrained, the mighty forest had become a pestilent marsh, and such of its ancient trees as had been spared by the woodman's axe had sunk into the pools and mosses, whence huge blocks were occasionally recovered, looking as if charred by fire.

A change, however, came at last. Many hundred acres of the waste had been enclosed and cultivated, and it was evident that in due time the whole would be reclaimed. Meanwhile, that part of the heath at which I had arrived was left very nearly in its pristine wild state, and furnished little occupation save to the turf-cutter. About half a mile off, in the midst of the moor, lay a little lake, or tarn, called Oak Mere, whose inky waters were much resorted to by wild-fowl. Further on was a curious group of small hills, known in the district as the Seven Lowes, and not far from these mounds was another pool.

In this direction the heath was bounded by a long and high ridge running on towards the beautiful village of Kelsal, and the summit of the furthest point of this mountainous barrier was crowned by an ancient British camp, popularly known as Kelsborrow Castle, whence a magnificent view might be obtained. Beyond Oak Mere were several morasses, designated respectively, from persons or circumstances connected with them, Riley Moss, Thieves' Moss, Relicts' Moss, Crap Moss, and Blakeford Moss. Further on there were two more morasses — Pinney Moss and Midgel Moss. Between these two last-named marshes was a large dismal-looking swamp —

for pool it scarcely deserved to be called — full of sedges and reeds, known as Great Blake Mere; and not far from it was another piece of water, called Hatchew Mere. There were four wells in the forest, each with a legend attached to it, the most noteworthy being Hind's Well and Swan's Well, and two ancient crosses, both referred to in the prophetic rhymes of Nixon, namely, the Headless Cross and the Maiden's Cross. On the side of the forest opposite to Kelsborrow Castle rose two eminences, respectively known as Castle Cob and Glead Hill Cob; and when I have mentioned the two large enclosures called the Old Pale and the New Pale, the chief features of this singular district will have been specified. Beautiful heaths of various kinds bloomed in the forest, and among the plants that grew there were the bilberry and cranberry, the asphodel, the bog myrtle, and the marsh-cistus.

The night was fine, but cloudy, with a soft southerly breeze, and generally speaking no very great extent of the forest was discernible. All distant objects on the black heathy tract were plunged in obscurity, while even those near at hand could hardly be distinguished. But when light was suddenly thrown on the scene by an outburst of the moon, the waste was revealed in all its gloomy grandeur. The predominant colour of the moor was a rich dark purple, caused by the heath covering its boggy soil; but here and there streaks of white glistening sand crossed it, while patches black as jet told where the turf had been cut. The surface of the moor was irregular and uneven — now swelling into heathy uplands, now sinking into little dells and valleys, in the midst of which lay the tarns.

The sky was overcast as I approached the place of rendezvous, and when within a hundred yards of the Headless Cross, I strained my eyes through the gloom in the vain hope of descriing Ned's stalwart figure. The darkness was too great to

allow any object to be discerned at that distance. All at once the clouds drifted past, and, the welcome radiance streaming down, showed me Ned seated on the ancient stone. On the same instant I became visible to him, though my horse's hoofs must have long since admonished him of my approach.

Springing up at once, he advanced to meet me, and, on nearing him, I cried out,

"Well, here I am, Ned, punctual to the appointment. On what sort of errand have I come?"

"It isn't from me that you'll gain an answer to that question, sir," he replied, "but from the pretty gipsy girl, Rue. She it was who commissioned me to bring you, between nine and ten o'clock to-night, to a secluded spot in the midst of the heath, which I dare say you know, called the Chamber of the Forest; promising to meet you there, and give you some important information. If you failed to keep the appointment, she said, you would ever after regret it; and she impressed caution so strongly on me, that I judged it safest only to write a few words to you, feeling sure you would guess my meaning."

"You did quite right, Ned," I replied. "But let us haste to the Chamber of the Forest. I am all impatience to learn what Rue has to communicate. She won't disappoint me, you think?"

"No fear of that, sir," he rejoined. "Her manner showed she was in right earnest. She seemed to be roused by some strong passion — revenge, mayhap."

"Revenge against whom, Ned?" I asked.

"Nay, that is more than I can tell, sir," he replied. "She didn't take me into her confidence. I only judge from her looks."

Our brief colloquy over, we left the high road, and,

entering upon the heath, proceeded towards the spot mentioned by the keeper. Our shortest way of reaching it would have been to pass by Oak Mere, and cross the marshy tract adjoining it; but this part of the forest was much too dangerous to traverse at such an hour, and we were therefore obliged to diverge considerably to the right, to make sure of firm ground. This devious route brought us within a short distance of an old pit, where some victims of the Great Pestilence had been buried, and which is known as the Plague Hole. After this we pushed on in silence, not without risk, but fortunately without further hindrance than was caused by the necessity of making an occasional *détour* in order to avoid a quagmire, until at last we were within a bowshot of the place we sought.

The Chamber of the Forest, once the centre of the vast woods of Mara or Delamere, was now nothing more than a scanty group of venerable trees, looking like the remains of an ancient Druidical grove. On beholding these scathed and hoary denizens of the wood, I jumped from my horse, and consigning the bridle to Ned, walked forward alone towards the grove. I did not observe Rue at first, but, as I advanced, a female figure, wrapped in a cloak, detached itself from the trunk of one of the largest of the trees, and stood before me.

"So you are come," Rue said. "An eventful night this may prove to you."

I inquired in what way.

"Have you no guess?" she rejoined. "But I won't keep you in suspense. Do as I bid you, and you may chance to recover the property of which you have been unjustly deprived."

"You promise me this?" I exclaimed, joyfully.

"Hush! not so loud!" she replied. "I don't promise it.

How can I? I can only point out the way to you. What you want you must win. If you fail, it will be from lack of prudence and courage."

"Then I hope I shall not fail," I replied. "How can I reward you for the service you are about to render me?"

"I claim no reward," Rue returned. "All I require is, that two persons whom I shall presently name to you, shall be exempted from harm. Will you promise this — on the word of a gentleman? I have little reason to place faith in a gentleman's word — nevertheless, I will take yours."

I reflected for a moment before making an answer.

"You hesitate!" she cried, angrily. "Then my lips are closed. Depart as you came."

"Nay," I replied, "I was bound to consider your proposal before acceding to it. I will give the promise you require, and keep it faithfully. I do not mean to imply any doubt as to the sincerity of your intentions towards me, but I would fain learn the motives that induce you to render me this great service?"

"My motives are mixed," she rejoined — "partly, the desire of vengeance; partly, anxiety to prevent the perpetration of a crime. You may not give me entire credit for the latter feeling, but it is so. He who has wronged you has also wronged me, and I know that by foiling his present purpose, I shall inflict the severest punishment on him, while I shall prevent those I love from committing a great offence. Do you apprehend me, or shall I speak yet more plainly?"

"I think I understand you," I replied. "Have you, then, been ensnared by the arts of Malpas Sale?"

"Ay," she cried; "I will make no secret of my shame. I was foolish enough to listen to him, and to believe that he loved me. But I soon found out that I had been deceived, and bitterly repented my error. When the charms he feigned

to perceive in me no longer pleased him, he slighted me, and, at last, abandoned me altogether. I might have expected as much, but I did not, for, blinded by passion, I placed confidence in his protestations of lasting regard. Lasting regard, forsooth!" she repeated, with bitter scorn — "regard, that barely endured for a month. He soon tired of me, cast me aside, and sought a new object of diversion. Sissy Culcheth's turn came then. You know what happened to her. My mother strove to save her from the net spread for her, but in vain. She was caught as easily as I had been, and would have shared my fate, if chance had not befriended her. But for me there was nothing left except revenge. I am not of a nature to brook such treatment as I have experienced. With the same degree of fervour that I loved Malpas once, I hate him now. It is to revenge myself on him that I serve you. It is through you that I mean to strike the blow that shall crush him. Have I made myself clear now?"

"Perfectly so," I replied. "You have cause enough to justify your vindictive feeling; and yet —"

"You would advise me to spare him," she cried, with a fierce and scornful laugh. "Were I to do so, how would you be righted? Have you now no sense of injury? Do you not know what an outraged woman becomes? If I listened only to the promptings of my heart, I should stab him. But I prefer the mode of vengeance I have adopted."

Feeling it would be in vain to argue with her, I did not attempt it. She went on:

"I have said that in serving you I am not entirely actuated by feelings of vengeance. I would not have those I love become my betrayer's accomplices in villany. I would save my father and brother from the commission of a crime. I would shield them from harm. It is on their behalf that I require the promise you have given me."

"Fear nothing," I replied. "They are safe so far as I am concerned. But in what way do you propose to right me? Malpas himself told me that the will is destroyed."

"He lied," Rue rejoined. "Falsehood is ever on his tongue. The will is still in existence. He affirmed the contrary, because he imagines it can never be produced against him. But he is in error. I will help you to find it."

"You will for ever make me your debtor," I cried.

"Spare your thanks till you have gained the prize," she said. "You shall now hear how matters now stand in regard to Simon Pownall. He is in great jeopardy. He expected to make a good bargain with Malpas for the surrender of that will, but he was indiscreet enough to impart his design to my father and brother. Their cupidity was excited, and a plan, contrived by Obed, was put in execution, by which they hoped to gain possession of the document, and make their own terms with Malpas. They managed to drug Pownall's drink, and while in a state of stupor they conveyed him to a place of security, and shut him up within it. When he came to himself, they demanded the will, threatening, if he refused, to make away with him. But he proved more obstinate than they expected. He told them they might find the will, if they could, but they never should do so with his aid — adding, that if they harmed him they would get the worst of it. My father said that a few days' confinement would make him alter his tone, and so they shut him up again."

"And he is still in their hands?" I inquired.

"He is still a prisoner," she replied, "and as impracticable as ever. My father and Obed have entered into a negotiation with Malpas. What terms they have made with him I know not, for they have kept the transaction secret from me, but to-night the business will be brought to an end. A last effort will be made to shake Pownall's resolution, and,

unless he yields, fatal consequences may ensue. This my father has sworn, and I much fear he will keep his oath. The crime must be prevented."

"It shall be prevented, if you will take me to the place where Pownall is held captive," I said.

"The place is not far off," she rejoined; "when I have brought you to it, you will act according to circumstances — but I rely upon your promise to do no injury to those dear to me. Tell my father that I have sent you — and *why* I have sent you. It may check his wrath. Have you no other arms except that hunting-whip?"

"No," I replied; "if I had been aware that I was about to embark on a service of danger, I would have come better prepared. But this hunting-whip will suffice. The handle is as heavy as a hammer. And Ned Culcheth is provided with a stout cudgel."

"Enough!" she cried. "Bid Ned follow us. You will need his assistance. I will show you where to leave your horse."

With this she started off in the direction of the marshy tract adjoining Great Blake Mere, skimming over the ground so lightly that her footsteps seemed scarcely to make any impression on the heath, and moving so fleetly that Ned and I had enough to do to keep up with her.

CHAPTER XII.

The Turf-Cutter's Hut.

ERE long, a black boggy tract opened upon us, intersected by deep dykes, cut in order to drain the morass, and giving abundant evidences, from its shaven surface and its pits, that the turf-cutter had been at work upon it.

On gaining this sombre region, Rue stopped near a couple of shattered and almost branchless trees, and waiting till Ned Culcheth came up with the horse, bade him to tie the animal to one of them. Her order obeyed, the gipsy girl bade us stay where we were for a moment, and keep behind the trunks of the trees. She then almost instantly disappeared.

Of late, the clouds had thickened in the sky, and it had become totally dark. But at this juncture the moon suddenly burst forth and revealed the whole scene. As I have said, we were now on a black bog, hardened by deep drainage, but yielding nothing at present except turf, stacks of which, cut and dried for fuel, were grouped around us in various fantastical shapes; while low walls of the same combustible substance, in various stages of preparation, were reared on all sides. Beyond us was a dismal-looking swamp, which I knew to be Great Blake Mere.

My attention, however, was chiefly directed, during this momentary illumination of the moorland, to the gipsy girl. Catching sight of her figure as it reappeared from amidst the turf-stacks, I discovered that she was hastening towards a low hovel, situated at the edge of the bog on which we were

standing, and within a stone's throw of the mere. No other habitation was visible except this lone hut. Stealing cautiously towards the little hovel, Rue paused close to it, listened for a moment, and then, apparently satisfied with her scrutiny, flew back towards us.

"Our business lies in yonder hut, I suppose, sir?" Ned inquired. Like myself, he had been watching Rue's proceedings.

"It does," I replied. "From what I have learnt, the four scoundrels we have so long sought are there. But I have given my word to this gipsy girl not to meddle with two of them — namely, her father and brother."

"Well, it's nat'ral she should wish to save 'em," Ned rejoined. "It's a pity two such rascals should get off — but better them than t'other two."

I then briefly related Rue's story to him, and had scarcely done, when she again stood before us.

"They are there," she said, pointing to the hut. "Are you ready? Have you cautioned Ned Culcheth?"

"Ay, ay," Ned replied. "Your kin shall come to no harm from me."

"Follow me, then," she replied.

Hastily making our way through the stacks of turf, and stepping over a plank thrown across a wide and deep dyke, we soon approached the hut. By this time the moon was again hidden, and all around had become dark and blank as before. Rue led us on with so much caution, that, had any one looked out, our approach would hardly have been perceived. When close to the hut, she stopped, and pointing towards it, said, "Your adversary is there. I heard his voice. Go and revenge yourself — and revenge me."

As she hissed this stern injunction in my ear, I could perceive, even by that imperfect light, that her beautiful features

were so distorted by passion that they scarcely looked human. Without another word, she darted back, and disappeared on the instant.

The hut was a small clay-built tenement, with a grey thatched roof. There was a still smaller out-building, or shed, attached to it. Even where we stood voices could be heard proceeding from the dwelling, and amongst them I had no difficulty in distinguishing the tones of Malpas Sale. Stepping cautiously forward, I approached the hut, desirous, if possible, to ascertain what was passing inside it. A little broken window, placed at a very convenient height from the ground, would have served my purpose perfectly, but I did not venture to avail myself of it, for, if I had done so, my presence must have been instantly detected. I was saved further search for means of investigation by Ned Culcheth, who pointed out a crack in the clay wall, and placing my eye to this crevice, I found that I commanded the whole interior of the cabin.

It was a wretched-looking place, and the only piece of furniture it afforded — a rude three-legged stool — was appropriated by Malpas, who sat with his back towards me, smoking a cigar. He was habited in a dark riding-dress and boots. Opposite him, on a block of wood, sat Simon Pownall, in the most miserable plight imaginable, his apparel torn and disordered, his visage blackened and begrimed, beard unshorn and grizzly, hair unkempt, and looks betokening abject terror, spiced with malignity. So changed was he by the treatment he had experienced, that I scarcely recognised him. Between the prisoner and the principal personage of the party was an old tub, turned upside down, serving the purpose of a table; and on this lay Malpas's cigar-case, and a pocket-flask containing spirit.

Light was afforded by a peat fire burning on the hearth-

stone, which Obed, at the moment I looked in, was fanning into a flame with his cap. Its light fell upon the swarthy and savage lineaments of Phaleg, who was seated upon a heap of turf, in close proximity to Pownall. Both gipsies had short pipes in their mouths, and puffed away at them with as much composure and unconcern as Malpas himself. I did not fail to remark that they had their bludgeons with them as usual, and I also noticed that Malpas was armed, for I saw the butt-ends of a brace of bull-dogs peeping out of his coat pockets, and it struck me that the weapons were rather ostentatiously displayed.

"Well, Pownall," Malpas said, "you must have found out by this time that your obstinacy is useless. You will be obliged to give in in the end, and may as well do so now as later on. Act like a man of sense, and tell us, without more ado, where to find the will."

"But what am I to have if I do tell you?" Pownall rejoined.

"Ask your friends here," Malpas returned, with a laugh. "My bargain is with them. They have engaged either to produce the will, or keep you out of the way. I don't deny that I should prefer the former arrangement, but so long as you are in safe custody I am perfectly easy."

"You hear what the capt'n says, Pownall," Phaleg remarked. "He knows you're safe in our hands. If he saw your place of confinement, he wouldn't think you had much chance of getting out of it without our permission."

"What is it like, Pownall?" Malpas inquired.

"The capt'n asks you a question," Phaleg said. "Describe your underground lodging, man."

"It's a dark, damp, unwholesome vault, lying under the shed adjoining this hovel," Pownall cried. "The place is unfit for the vilest criminal — let alone a decent, well-behaved man

like me. Look at it yourself, Captain Sale, and it will make your heart sick. I will never believe you could authorise such cruelty as is practised upon me."

"Who's to blame for the cruelty but yourself?" Phaleg roared. "I'll set you free in a moment if you'll only tell where that will is hidden."

"Come, don't be obstinate, Pownall," Malpas said. "You'll gain nothing by standing out. Your chance is gone by. The document can be of no use to you now."

"I don't know that, Captain Sale," Pownall rejoined, sullenly. "Perhaps it may."

"Don't you heed him, capt'n," Phaleg cried. "It never shall be of any use to him. Sooner than that, I'll tie a stone round his neck like a dog, and drown him in one of these black meres."

"Nay, that would be going a trifle too far, Phaleg," Malpas remarked. "I only want him kept out of the way."

"All right, capt'n," the ruffian rejoined. "He shan't trouble you again, I'll warrant him."

"You will do well to listen to what I have to say, Captain Sale," Pownall cried, in a half-menacing tone. "I am not about to beg my life of these men, for I know I am in their power, and it appears they will show me no mercy. But understand this, if I am put out of the way as I am threatened by this villain — or even if I am detained a prisoner much longer — that document will be taken to Mervyn Clitheroe."

Malpas sprang to his feet, and clapped his hands to his pistols.

"Poh! poh! this is mere idle talk," Phaleg cried. "I should like to know how that can be done?"

"You will find out the truth of what I assert if you proceed to extremities with me," Pownall continued, evidently trying to heighten the impression he had produced; "and so will

Captain Sale. I took these precautions in case of some such mischance as has befallen me. You are now warned, Captain Sale, and will know what to expect."

"Curse the fellow!" Malpas exclaimed. "If this should be so! — but no! I cannot believe him," he added, sitting down again.

"A mere trumped-up story, capt'n," Obed remarked. "He never said a word of the sort afore."

"Because the occasion never arose before," Pownall said. "I address myself to Captain Sale — not to you. He knows what the consequences will be to himself if the will is produced."

Malpas only gave utterance to a deep oath, but his troubled countenance showed what was passing within. Pownall contemplated him with a malignant grin. The cunning knave began to feel secure.

"Harkee! Phaleg," Malpas cried, at length, "this rascal is too much for us. We had better make terms with him."

"If you don't, you'll never have that property," Pownall said, doggedly. "Detain me a prisoner, or put me out of the way altogether, and as sure as I stand here, that will will be taken to Mervyn Clitheroe."

Both gipsies laughed incredulously.

"Don't mind him, capt'n," Phaleg cried. "It's merely an artful device to get out of our clutches. We've got him safe enough, and mean to keep him. He accounts himself a rare conjuror, but with all his tricks he won't get out'of our black-hole."

"After the warning I have given him, Captain Sale, I am sure, will never be so blind to his own interests as to allow me to be sent thither again," Pownall said.

Malpas looked perplexed.

"I tell you what it is, Pownall," he cried, at length. "I

don't attach much faith to what you say, but it's best to be on the safe side. Just talk over the matter with your friends there, and when you've agreed together, I'll see whether I can meet you."

"I'm agreeable," Phaleg said.

"But I am not," Pownall cried. "I will have nothing more to do with these men, Captain Sale. They have both played me false, and, so far as I can help it, they shan't derive any benefit from their treachery. They can't produce what you require. Why should they be parties to any bargain between you and me?"

"What game is t' owd fox tryin' to play now, I wonder, father?" Obed remarked to the elder gipsy.

"I can't tell what he be after," Phaleg rejoined, with a tremendous oath; "but this I know — he never sees daylight again unless the will be forthcoming."

"Captain Sale, I appeal to you," Pownall cried. "You are a gentleman, and will protect me. You won't suffer me to be murdered by these ruffians."

And as he spoke, he made an effort to rush towards Malpas, but he was forcibly held back by the iron grasp of Phaleg.

"A word will procure your liberation, Pownall," Malpas observed, in an impassive tone. "You have only to thank yourself if any harm befalls you. But since you refuse to listen to me, I must wish you good night. Perhaps you may be more reasonable when I see you next."

And he proceeded deliberately to light another cigar, as if preparing for departure.

"Captain Sale! Captain Sale!" Pownall cried, in extremity of terror. "You won't leave me to these merciless ruffians. I shall never survive it, if I am thrown into that black, stifling hole again, and my death will lie at your door. Save me! save me!"

"Speak the word, then," Malpas rejoined. "The will! where is it?"

"Take me with you, and I will find it for you."

"Don't trust him, capt'n," Phaleg said, still maintaining his hold of the trembling caitiff. "Besides, he shan't go, unless we go with him."

"Another night's confinement won't do you any great harm, Pownall," Malpas replied, with a savage laugh.

"It'll bring him to his senses," Phaleg roared.

"It'll kill me!" Pownall shrieked. "You won't find me alive when you come back, Captain Sale."

"Oh! yes, I shall," Malpas rejoined, indifferently. "And I've no doubt by that time you'll have settled your differences with honest Phaleg and his son. Good night!" And he rose as if to depart.

"I beseech you, Captain Sale, do not abandon me!" Pownall cried. "As I live, I have told you the truth."

"We'll talk more about it to-morrow night," Malpas rejoined.

"But I won't be left here," Pownall cried, struggling ineffectually with Phaleg. "Help! help!"

"Shout till you're hoarse," the gipsy said. "No one will hear you."

The poor wretch continued his outcries.

"Better thrust him into the vault, Phaleg," Malpas said. "He may give the alarm."

"No fear of that, capt'n," the gipsy rejoined. "Hold your tongue! will you, you cursed warmint," he added, with a fearful imprecation.

Meanwhile, I had whispered some directions to Ned, and now, judging the fitting moment come, I gave him the word of attack. Ned, begged me, in a whisper, to let him go in first, and without tarrying for my consent, dashed himself with all

his force against the door, bursting it at once from its hinges, and before the occupants of the hut could recover from the surprise caused by his unexpected intrusion, I had sprung over the tub, and forced Pownall from Phaleg's grasp. The miserable caitiff instantly saw that there was a chance of his liberation, and eagerly caught at it. He dexterously tripped up Obed's heels, as the latter rushed forward to intercept his flight, and would have made a prompt exit from the hut, if the doorway had not been locked up by Ned Culcheth, who had seized and pinioned Malpas. All this was the work of a moment, but in that space of time I had got clear of Phaleg. My hunting-whip enabled me to ward off a desperate blow which he aimed at my head, but I forbore to strike him in return, though I could have brained him, if I had pleased, with the handle, but shouted out—"Hold your hand, Phaleg! I don't want to harm you or your son. I am sent here by Rue."

"What! has she sent you here?" he cried, taken completely aback. "Has she sold her own father? Curses upon her!"

"Turn your wrath against him who deserves it, and not upon her," I cried. "You are not so lost to shame that you will aid the man who has ruined and abandoned your daughter."

"Abandoned Rue!" Phaleg vociferated. "Whom do you mean?"

"There stands the betrayer," I rejoined, pointing to Malpas, who was ineffectually struggling to free himself from Ned. "Let him deny what I say if he can."

"Speak, capt'n," Phaleg roared, "and give him the lie."

"He can't speak," Ned rejoined. "The words would choke him if he tried."

"He now feels the effects of an injured woman's vengeance," I said. "Rue's hand strikes this blow."

"This may be true, father," Obed cried; "and we will settle the account with the capt'n by-and-by. But, meanwhile, we mustn't let these chaps take Pownall away."

"If I had only known this sooner, I'd have strangled the false-hearted villain rather than have had anything to do wi' him," Phaleg cried.

"Take him, and deal with him as you see fit," Ned Culcheth cried, hurling Malpas with such force against the elder gipsy that they both fell to the ground, and following me as I rushed out of the hut with Pownall.

"Take me away from them, Mr. Clitheroe! — take me away!" the miserable wretch cried. "Promise not to deliver me to justice, and you shall have the will. I will show you where it is hidden."

"I can make no promise now," I replied. "Come along!"

By this time we had reached the deep dyke already described, and after we had all crossed it, in order to check pursuit I kicked the plank into the chasm. Scarcely had I done so, when Malpas rushed out of the hut, and on seeing us he gave vent to ejaculations of rage. Fancying himself now in security, Pownall could not help gratifying his malicious feelings, and called out,

"You have lost the will, captain. I shall now deliver it to him for whom it was rightfully intended."

"Ha! say you so, rascal?" Malpas cried. "That shall be prevented, at all events."

And as the words were pronounced he drew a pistol, levelled it at Pownall, and fired with such good effect that the unfortunate man uttered a sharp cry, threw up his arms, and fell backwards into the dyke.

"Lie there with your secret!" Malpas cried, hurrying back to the hut.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Chase across the Morass.

ON seeing Pownall drop into the dyke, my first impulse was to jump across the chasm and endeavour to arrest his murderer; but as I ran back a few paces in order to give impetus to the spring, Ned Culcheth caught me by the arm, and strove to dissuade me from the rash attempt.

While I was struggling to free myself from his friendly grasp, Malpas again burst from the hut, followed by the gipsies. I could not make out at first whether the intentions of the two latter were hostile to him or the reverse; but I was not long left in doubt, for in another minute all three stopped near a stack of turf, from behind which Obed brought a horse, while Malpas placed what appeared to me to be a pocket-book in the hands of the elder gipsy. This done, Captain Sale mounted and rode off.

"By Heaven, he shall not escape in this manner!" I exclaimed.

And I flew to the spot where my own steed was secured, unloosed him, and was on his back in a moment.

Ned made another effort to detain me, but I was too much excited to heed his remonstrances, and dashed off instantly after the fugitive, whom I could just descry scouring across the waste in the direction of the most perilous morasses. But this did not deter me from the pursuit, but rather encouraged me, as I felt the more certain of his capture. Clearing the dyke, I put my horse to the top of his speed, and was glad to

perceive that the distance between me and my flying foe began rapidly to diminish.

Very soon Malpas was scarcely a hundred yards in advance of me. Wherever he went I unhesitatingly followed; and it was a marvel that either escaped the many pitfalls by which the way was beset.

A region was now at hand where the utmost caution was necessary. Yet Malpas did not slacken his pace, or deviate in the slightest degree from a direct course. I expected every moment to see him disappear in the bog, but, astonishing to say, the ground still continued firm beneath his horse's feet, and he must either have known where to find the narrow causeway across this part of the morass, or have accidentally hit it off. By following in his track, I came off equally well.

But bad as this place was, we had greater risks to encounter. We had leaped a brook issuing from Relict's Moss, and were passing between Crap Moss and Blakeford Moss. In front was a small reedy tarn, called Shipley Mere. The whole place, in fact, was a marsh. The ground quaked beneath our horses' feet as we splashed on. Still through all these difficulties and dangers Malpas held on, and I followed.

Shipley Mere was passed in safety. But another dangerous morass was at hand, Thieves' Moss. I never expected Malpas would reach it, or, if he did, that he would be able to proceed further. To my surprise he went on, and though he occasionally floundered, he did not stop. I also got on without material hindrance. We were now close upon the high road across the forest between Northwich and Chester, and before Captain Sale could clear the palings that skirted it, I was within twenty yards of him.

Finding himself hard pressed, he did not attempt to pursue this road, but leaping the fence on the further side, again plunged into the heath, taking the direction of Oak Mere. I after him, of course.

Once more we were on a shaking bog — once in fearful proximity to treacherous quagmires. Immediately on our right was Riley Moss: on the left mere a smaller, but yet more perilous marsh. The swampy nature of the ground no longer allowed Malpas to keep up the head-long pace he had hitherto maintained. It was with difficulty he got on at all. His horse sank in the oozy bog at every step. I was in equal jeopardy, and at last had the mortification of seeing Malpas reach a firm piece of ground, while my horse stuck quite fast.

All danger was now over with Captain Sale. After carefully considering the course to be pursued, he rode off, laughing derisively at my situation, and I soon lost sight of him.

My efforts to free myself from the quagmire in which I was caught only made matters worse. My horse got more and more inextricably involved at every plunge, and at length seemed to be sinking altogether. In order, therefore, to save myself from inevitable destruction, I was compelled to abandon him. The poor animal seemed conscious of the terrible fate awaiting him, and struggled violently to free himself, but his efforts only hastened his doom. Each moment he sank deeper and deeper — until at last, with a shrill cry — he entirely disappeared.

My own position was fraught with too much peril to allow time for reflection on this disastrous event. Grieved as I was to lose my horse, preservation of my own life was the main point to consider. With great difficulty I managed to extricate myself from the morass, and this accomplished, I soon

reached a part of the heath where the sod was firm, and there was no longer any risk. I was shaping my course towards the Tarporley road, which was not very far off, when I heard shouts in the distance, and descried Ned Culcheth running towards me. I waited till the honest fellow came up. He had been searching for me, and had been greatly alarmed at my disappearance. After I had explained to him what had happened, he said,

“You’ve had a lucky escape, sir, I can tell you. These bogs are like quicksands, and when once man or beast gets involved in them, they are never seen again. I wish that confounded Captain Sale were beside your poor horse. But his day of reckoning can’t be far off, and he may meet with a worse fate than being smothered in a bog.”

We then made the best of our way to the mill, where my companion tarried with me during the few hours left of the night.

CHAPTER XIV.

The Search for the Body.

NEXT morning Ned set off betimes for Marston. He had instructions from me to lay all particulars of the dark deed that had occurred overnight before Mr. Mapletoft, a neighbouring magistrate, and to obtain from that gentleman a warrant for Malpas's immediate arrest. I proposed to be at Marston myself in the afternoon, when the accusation against Malpas could be heard by Mr. Mapletoft, but the morning must be devoted to a search for the murdered man. Charged with these instructions, Ned departed.

I should now have been badly off for a steed, but luckily, Mr. Mavis had a stout young horse which he kept for his own use, so I was able at once to supply the place of the unfortunate animal I had lost in the bog.

An impulse not to be resisted drew me in the first place to Weverham. On reaching John's cottage, I found that he had returned from Cottonborough at a late hour on the night before — much to my chagrin, also, I learnt that he had returned alone. I sat down to wait for him in his little parlour. He soon made his appearance, and in a few words made me acquainted with what had occurred since I had left him with Dr. Foam. The doctor, he said, whose goodness of heart and excellence of judgment could not be doubted, had strongly advised him not to remove Apphia from her mother for the present, and had given such good reasons for his counsel, that in the end he had yielded.

By taking away your sister at once, Dr. Foam had said to my friend, you will naturally offend your mother, with whom

further disagreement ought sedulously to be avoided. You cannot foresee how Lady Amicia may act. Very probably her character may be softened by her improved circumstances. At all events, give her a fair trial. Consider the importance of a wealthy and titled mother's protection to Apphia, and do not rashly deprive her of such great advantages.

"I could not deny the force of much that the worthy doctor advanced," John said, "and I felt that it would be selfish in me to desire to have my sister with me, since it was so much more to her own interest to remain with our mother. Whether I have done right, time will show. I shall have this consolation at least, that I have acted for the best. Before leaving Cottonborough, I made a point of seeing Apphia in order to ascertain her sentiments. As you may imagine — for you know how devotedly attached my sister was to dear Mrs. Mervyn — I found her plunged in deep affliction, but she herself thought it would not be right to leave our mother at a time like the present. Prudential motives may have swayed her, for all particulars of our family history had been imparted to her by Lady Amicia, but she must have been mainly influenced by the change in our mother's manner. Subsequently I had an interview with Lady Amicia, and am bound to say that she produced a very favourable impression upon me — so favourable, indeed, as almost to warrant me in hoping that the improvement in her character may be permanent. In all respects, indeed, the interview was satisfactory."

Whatever opinion I might entertain as to the probable duration of Lady Amicia's present amiable frame of mind, I made no remark to my friend, but proceeded to recount to him the fearful occurrences of the previous night. He heard me with profound attention, and seemed greatly shocked by the details of Malpas's criminality.

"Badly as I had thought of him," he said, "this far exceeds

any notion I had formed of his villany. His base conduct towards that young gipsy girl would suffice to stamp him as an unprincipled profligate — and now he has dyed his hands in blood. What would have been Apphia's fate if she had been united to such a wretch! We may, indeed, congratulate ourselves on her escape."

Soon after this I took leave of my friend, and rode on to Owlarton Grange.

Tidings of Mrs. Mervyn's demise had preceded me. Intelligence of the sad event had been communicated by Dr. Foam to Cuthbert Spring, who, with Major Atherton, was still staying at the Grange. The doctor had imparted full particulars of the poor lady's disposition of her property, mentioning, of course, that the so-called Mrs. Brideoake had assumed her real name and title of Lady Amicia Wilburton. Aware of all this, Miss Hazilrigge and Ora overwhelmed me with inquiries about Apphia and John. Ora was in despair that the property had not been left to the latter, and could scarcely find words strong enough to express her vexation at Lady Amicia's success. "I hope John will get the title, in spite of her," she cried. "I'm sure if we have any means of helping him to do so, they shan't be wanting." Good-natured Mrs. Hazilrigge was nearly as much annoyed by the untoward event as her niece, though she did not exhibit her disappointment with so much vivacity. I was obliged to tell them that the object of their sympathy was quite indifferent to the loss he had sustained, and that when the title had been offered him, he had been most reluctant to accept it.

"Ah, indeed! he has less selfishness than any one I ever met with," Miss Hazilrigge exclaimed. "I have always declared that he is too good for this world."

"Don't you recollect the discussion we had upon this subject some time ago, Mervyn?" Ora said to me. "It now ap-

pears that Mr. Spring was in the secret all the time, and knew that by good right John ought to be Lord Wilburton."

"Yes, I must own that Dr. Foam had taken me into his confidence," Cuthbert replied; "but then I was bound to secrecy."

"Do you think Apphia will remain with her mother?" Miss Hazilrigge inquired.

"Impossible to say," I replied; "but there seems every probability of her doing so."

"What will become of John?" Miss Hazilrigge cried. "Positively, we must have him here."

"Call him Lord Wilburton, aunt, if you please," Ora said. "He must have the title, and we may as well, therefore, give it him at once."

Not wishing to disturb the ladies by any illusion to the errand on which I was bound, I begged a word in private with Mr. Hazilrigge and my two friends, upon which they at once adjourned with me to another room. My relation astonished them all, and no one more than Old Hazy, who could not help expressing great concern for the fate of the luckless Thaumaturgus.

All three immediately volunteered to accompany me to Delamere Forest; and professed their anxiety to assist in the needful inquisition there, and then go on with me to Marston. I gladly embraced the offer, whereupon Old Hazy ordered the carriage to be got ready with the utmost expedition, telling Ponder, at my suggestion, that Stephen Blackden must go with us, and be provided with an eel-spear, a couple of long poles, and a coil of rope. These arrangements made, Major Atherton and I went round to the stables, and, mounting our horses, rode off, leaving the others to follow. As we proceeded on our way, the major fell into discourse with me, and assumed a far more kindly and confidential manner towards me than he

had hitherto adopted; expressing great concern at my disappointment in my expectations in regard to Mrs. Mervyn, but hoping that I might still recover my uncle Mobberley's will, which would make amends for all. As to my chance of obtaining Apphia's hand, he thought that the difficulties were certainly increased by the present perplexed state of affairs, but if the young lady remained constant, all must come right in the end.

We had reached the confines of Delamere Forest before the carriage overtook us. Instead of proceeding to the Headless Cross as I had done on the night before, we turned off about half a mile short of it, at a point where the Tarporley road is crossed by the road from Northwich to Chester, and, pursuing the latter, soon got into the heart of the forest.

Here we were compelled to take to the turf, and as the carriage could proceed no further, Old Hazy and Cuthbert Spring alighted, and followed by Stephen Blackden, bearing the eel-spear, rope, and poles, we proceeded towards the hut, which was about a mile distant. A couple of poorly-clad men, with spades over their shoulders, who proved to be turf-cutters, were standing near the little tenement, but noticing our approach, they hastened to meet us. We had no difficulty in crossing the dyke, for the plank had been restored to its original position. On explaining our errand to the turf-cutters, they appeared extremely surprised, but readily promised to aid us in our search, declaring at the same time that they had seen nothing except the plank in the dyke. "To be sure we never expected to see a murdered man there," one of them remarked.

"Whom does the hut belong to?" I asked.

"It was built by one Dick Hornby," the turf-cutter replied; "but he has been dead more than a year, and latterly the hovel has only been used by vagrants. I have seen a couple of

gipsies hanging about it for the last three or four days, and I thought they might have taken up their quarters in there, and so I told Tom Tarvin."

"Ay, so you did, Will Duddon," the other replied. "You said you were quite sure the gipsies lodged in old Hornby's hut."

Meanwhile, we had approached the edge of the dyke, and the two turf-cutters, quickly divesting themselves of their shoes and stockings, let themselves drop into the channel, which in this place was about two feet deep in water. The depth of the dyke was about twelve or fourteen feet. The eel-spear and a pole were then handed down to the men, and we watched their proceedings from the brink. I indicated the exact spot where Pownall had fallen, and the turf-cutters carefully searched the channel at the point, but made no discovery. There was a slight — very slight — current in the inky water, and it was possible that the body of the unfortunate man might have been carried on, so they waded along for at least a hundred yards, using pole and spear as they went, but without finding anything — we watching them all the time from above — until they came to a spot which it was impossible the body could have passed. This was a small pool, into which the water flowing along the dyke emptied itself. Beyond, there was another outlet, but it was protected by stakes planted closely together. Here, then, the body must be, if at all, and here a most careful search was made by the two men; but nothing was found, and after some time spent in useless exertion, they were obliged to give up the job.

"He's not here, masters, that's sartin," Will Duddon cried. "We'll hark back, and see whether he be further up; though he must have come down the stream if no life were left in him."

With this they retraced their steps, and proceeded to a considerable distance beyond the place where Pownall had been shot, until they reached another pool, somewhat larger than the one they had just explored. There seemed little likelihood that the body would be found here, but this was the last chance, and accordingly the men set to work again, splashing about, plying spear and pole as actively as before, and leaving not a hole or corner unvisited, but with no better success than heretofore. At last, they both came out.

“Well, we’ve done our best to find him for you, masters,” Will Duddon said; “and if he had been in the dyke, or in either of these pools, we couldn’t have missed him. But the man has either got out himself, or been taken out — that’s clear.”

We could not contradict the assertion. Further search seemed hopeless.

At this juncture Tom Tarvin shouted out, “What’s that?” and ran towards a sloping bank through which the dyke was cut in its junction with the pool.

We all thought that the object of our scrutiny was at last discovered, but it proved to be only an old shoe which was left sticking in the soft boggy soil. On examination of this shoe, I felt almost sure that it had belonged to Pownall. If the supposition were correct, how came it there? Had Pownall only been severely wounded, and had he managed to creep out of the dyke at this point? or had the shoe been dropped by those who bore away the body? The former conjecture seemed the more probable, for it was evident that the shoe had been plucked from the foot of the wearer by the tenacious soil of the bog. Further search resulted in our finding an old coloured neckerchief, which I identified as belonging to Pownall, for I had seen him wear it on the previous night.

We continued our investigations around and about the place for some time longer, but without further result.

We next proceeded to examine the hut. The interior was left in precisely the same state as I had seen it on the night before. The peat fire was still smouldering on the hearth-stone. In searching the shed we made a singular discovery. After removing a quantity of dry fern and gorse, with which the little out-building was filled, we found that the floor was paved, and it presently appeared that one of the flags had an iron ring fixed in it by which it could be lifted, as well as a bar to fasten it down. Raising this flag, which moved on hinges like a trap-door, a dark, damp vault was disclosed. On descending into this subterranean chamber by a short ladder, reared just underneath the opening, we found that it was entirely constructed of stone, and was evidently of great antiquity. Most probably the vault had been an underground cell used by a recluse in old times, and might have belonged to the Monastery of Saint Mary in Vale Royal. A light was kindled, and we were then enabled to examine the spot more carefully. The roof was arched and groined, and the masonry was but slightly dilapidated, but as may be supposed, the place was excessively damp from the constant moisture dripping through the stones. The floor was an inch or two deep in black ooze. Nothing could be more wretched than the aspect of the vault, and the austere penitent would have shrunk aghast if enjoined to occupy it. And yet Pownall had been thrust into this dismal hole by his confederates! A few trusses of straw were thrown in one corner, on which he had found refuge from the damp floor. The chamber must have been perfectly dark when occupied by the captive, but air was admitted by a small grated aperture at one end of the roof. If this aperture had been choked up, the poor wretch must inevitably have perished. Indeed, it was a marvel that he had

survived his confinement. A broken pitcher set on the ground near the trusses of straw was the only memento left of him. We were glad to get out of the place, and breathe the fresh air once more.

"Poor wretch!" Major Atherton exclaimed, "if he was immured in that vault for three or four days, he must have suffered enough for his offences, be they what they may."

"It is very odd we can find no traces of the body," Cuthbert Spring remarked. "The man may have only been wounded after all, and have crept out of the dyke."

"I begin to think so," I said.

"I tell you what, my young friend," Old Hazy observed, gravely. "You need not go so far to find a solution of the mystery. You have been beguiled by evil spirits, and the whole scene you have witnessed has been merely a phantasm conjured up to perplex you. Delamere Forest is notoriously infested by elves, sprites, and fairies, and these mischievous beings have made you their sport. When we get back to the Grange, I will find you several instances of similar delusions in Thiræus and Robert de Triez."

Serious as the subject was on which we were engaged, I could scarcely help smiling at this singular view of the case, and I saw that Major Atherton's gravity was a good deal disturbed, while Cuthbert Spring was at no pains to repress his laughter.

"So then, sir," I said, "your opinion is that evil spirits assumed the forms of Malpas Sale, the two gipsies, and Simon Pownall?"

"I have no doubt of it whatever," he replied. "I will cite you a passage presently in confirmation of my opinion from Père Jacques D'Autum's '*Learned Incredulity*.'"

"I wish I could think so," I said, "but unluckily I cannot help believing in the reality of the scene; and I feel as certain

as I do of my existence that I saw Pownall shot by Malpas Sale, and fall — lifeless, it seemed to me — into that dyke."

"If that had been the case, we should find his body," the old gentleman cried. "But we can't, sir — we can't. No; it is evidently a delusion. Read Père Jacques, and be convinced."

No more could be said in refutation of such an argument, so having rewarded the poor turf-cutters for the assistance they had rendered, we returned to the carriage.

It was then decided that we should proceed to Marston by the most direct road, which from this point was by Northwich, and not by Weverham. Old Hazy would fain have had us call at the Grange, saying he was sure we must stand in need of refreshment after our exertions, but this we declined, as we suspected him of a design of producing Père Jacques. Stephen Blackden, however, was dismissed with the implements we had used in the search, and enjoined to make the ladies easy in case of our non-appearance.

CHAPTER XV.

The Examination before the Magistrates.

WE halted for half an hour at Northwich, and the afternoon was advancing ere we reached Marston. Major Atherton and I had ridden on before the carriage, and we dismounted at the Nag's Head.

"Please to step into the parlour, gentlemen," Mr. Hale, the landlord, said, opening the door of a small room, and ushering us into it. "You'll like to be private, I make no doubt. Mat, the ostler, will see to your horses. Ned Culcheth has only just stepped out, and will be back presently."

"I suppose you know what has happened, Mr. Hale?" I said.

"I do, sir," he replied; "Ned has told me all about it. But you'll excuse me for saying that in the present stage of proceedings I would rather not give an opinion on the subject. There are two sides to every question, you know, sir, and I like to be on the right side."

"Very prudent, Mr. Hale. Can you inform me whether Captain Sale has been arrested?"

"Oh! yes, sir, he's in custody of Bryan Peover, the constable," the landlord replied. "The examination is fixed for five o'clock, for Ned said you were sure to be here by that time, and will take place in the justice-room at the vicarage. It's half-past four now. So you fancy you can bring the matter home to the captain, eh, sir?"

"I'm sure of it, Mr. Hale," I replied.

“Well, they think differently at the vicarage. They say it’s a trumped affair. Excuse me, sir — but that’s their opinion — not mine. I have no opinion at present. Anything more to say to me, sir? If not, I’ll go and send a messenger to Mr. Twemlow, the magistrate’s clerk, to let him know you are come.”

With this he went out, but almost instantly returned to say that a young woman wanted to speak to me outside. On hearing this, I accompanied him to the outer door, where, to my great satisfaction — for I felt how important her testimony might be in the examination — I beheld Rue.

“I thought you would want me,” she said, “so I have come. I have seen Ned Culcheth, and have heard all that has happened. You managed the affair badly last night — but you mustn’t fail to-day.”

“I don’t intend to fail, if I can help it,” I replied. “But your evidence is material, and must be given.”

“It shall,” she answered.

At this moment the carriage drove up to the door of the little inn, and as Old Hazy and Cuthbert Spring alighted, she retired.

Shortly afterwards, Ned Culcheth made his appearance, and we set out in a body for the vicarage. The whole village was astir. Women and children stood at the doors of the cottages to see us pass, and a crowd followed in our train. Amongst those who attended us thus, and whom I recognised, were Job Greaseby, the smith; Farmer Shakeshaft; William Weever, from Nethercrofts; and Chetham Quick. Loud and angry discussion was going on amongst these personages as to the probable result of the examination, and I could hear Chetham Quick roundly declare that he was confident the charge would fall to the ground.

The vicarage, as I have already mentioned, closely adjoined the church. It was a large, comfortable old house, surrounded by a grove of fine trees, with a delightful garden at the back, having a smooth-shaven lawn sloping down to the mere. As we turned up the little lane leading to this ordinarily quiet residence, our numbers had greatly increased, and we must have been at the head of a troop of thirty or forty people, all curious to hear the inquiry. Of course, we could not dismiss them, but it was evident that so many persons could not be admitted, and a stoppage took place at the garden-gates, where Ben Tintwisle, the fat old beadle, was stationed. Ben looked very big and portentous, being arrayed in his scarlet cloak, and having his laced cocked-hat on his head, and his rod of office in hand. Twelve persons were only allowed to pass him. Ned Culcheth tarried at the gate for Rue, who had not yet come up, and I went on with the others. A footman was standing at the door, who ushered us into the dining-room, begging us to be seated, and saying he would let us know when all was ready. We took the seats assigned us, and had not occupied them more than a few minutes when the man returned, and requested us to follow him.

The justice-room, whither we were now conducted, was situated at the rear of the house. It was a large, plainly-furnished apartment, with a desk at the upper end, at which the doctor sat when he heard complaints, signed warrants, arranged disputes, or otherwise exercised his functions as a magistrate. On either side of the old-fashioned chimney-piece were book-cases, and facing it was a large bow-window, commanding a beautiful view of the mere. Portraits of some of the Vernon family — Mrs. Sale, it will be recollected, was a Vernon — hung against the walls, and there was also a portrait of my uncle Mobberley, which, though painted after the good old man's death, and copied from a miniature, was

exceedingly like him. No attempt had been made to flatter the unpretending old farmer. There he was as I had known him, in his simply-cut blue coat, with his prominent nose and chin, his right eye covered with a great black patch, and his left orb blazing fiercely. Beneath this portrait was suspended a plan of Nethercrofts and the property thereunto appertaining, and I could not help thinking there was a kind of dramatic propriety in the circumstance of this portrait and plan being brought in juxtaposition on the present occasion. Who so fitting to be a silent witness of the scene about to be enacted — a scene arising out of the disappearance of his own will — as John Mobberley? What accessory so appropriate as a plan of the property in dispute?

Ned Culcheth and I were the last to enter the justice-room. Casting my eyes around, I saw that all the rest of the assemblage had taken their places. In the chair usually occupied by Dr. Sale sat Mr. Mapletoft, of Birkinfield Hall, an elderly gentleman, with a quick grey eye, and a keen expression of countenance. He was tall, rather high-shouldered, and of a spare frame, and his silvery white hair contrasted with his ruddy complexion. Mr. Mapletoft's invariable attire in a morning was a green Newmarket coat, buckskins, and top-boots. On the right of the senior magistrate sat Mr. Vernon, of Fitton Park (Dr. Sale's brother-in-law) — a very aristocratic-looking personage, with fine, though rather prominent, features and a very stately deportment. Like Mr. Mapletoft, Mr. Vernon wore a riding-dress and boots. Mr. Hazilrigge, who was in the commission of the Peace, had a place assigned him on the left of the principal magistrate, and next to him — though with a little interval between them — sat Dr. Sale. On the other side of the seat of justice, and close to Mr. Vernon, was placed a small table, at which sat the magistrate's clerk, Mr. Twemlow — a bald-headed man, at-

tired in black — with pens, ink, and paper, and a few law-books before him. Behind the magistrates sat Cuthbert Spring, and a few paces behind Mr. Spring, and in a corner of the room, to which he had retired as if to avoid observation, stood Major Atherton.

One feature in the arrangements of the room did not fail to attract my attention. In the vicinity of Dr. Sale a large Indian screen was placed, so disposed as to conceal the person who sat behind it, and who was no other than Mrs. Sale, from general observation, but revealing her presence to the magistrates, and to all those who, like myself, were stationed near them. After glancing at her for a moment, I did not dare to look at her again, for the sight of her distress quite unmanned me. At the lower end of the room, on the right, were grouped together some ten or a dozen yeomen, amongst whom were Farmer Shakeshaft, William Weever, and old Job Greaseby. A clear space in front of the magistrates was preserved by the fat beadle, who kept continually knocking upon the floor with his wand.

Such were the general arrangements of the room. I ought to mention that there were three doors: one on the right of the chimney-piece, near which sat Mrs. Sale, partially hidden, as I have described, by the screen; and two others at the lower end of the room. One of the latter communicated with the offices, and the other with a little passage leading to the back staircase, and it was through the last of these that Malpas was introduced, as I shall now proceed to relate.

After the senior magistrate and Mr. Vernon had conferred together for a few minutes in a low tone, the former signified to Mr. Twemlow that they were ready to hear the case; whereupon silence having been authoritatively imposed upon the group of talkative yeomen in the corner by the fat beadle, who thumped his wand upon the floor, the magistrate's clerk

rose and directed that Captain Sale should be introduced. Upon this, Tintwisle marched to the door I have described, and opening it, delivered the summons in a loud voice.

In the profound silence that ensued, steps could be distinctly heard outside, and in another moment Malpas entered into the room, closely attended by Bryan Peover, the constable, a stout-built, hard-featured man. Stepping lightly forward into the centre of the open space reserved in front of the magistrates, Malpas entered, bowed gracefully and deferentially to Mr. Mapletoft, and those on either side, and then, drawing up his fine figure to its full height, fixed his gaze sternly and steadily on me. He looked extremely pale, but determined. Though it was quite evident from his manner that he did not underrate the peril in which he stood, yet it was equally clear that he was not in the slightest degree cast down by it, but felt confident of acquittal. There was nothing of insolence or bravado in his manner, but he appeared as if deeply hurt and indignant at the charge brought against him, and eager to justify himself. His attire was studiously elegant, and nothing had been neglected likely to heighten the effect he desired to produce. As he entered the room, poor Mrs. Sale started up with a faint cry, and leaned forward from behind the screen to look at him, but Dr. Sale took her hand, and induced her to resume her seat. Major Atherton, also, who had hitherto kept in the background, came forward, as if moved by curiosity. Bryan Peover thought it behoved him to stand close by his charge, but at a sign from Twemlow he now moved back, and Malpas stood alone in the midst of the assemblage.

After the customary oath had been administered to me by the magistrate's clerk, I commenced my narration; but as the reader is already familiar with the particulars of the case, it will be unnecessary to recapitulate them. When I had con-

cluded, Malpas emphatically denied the charge, which he characterised as utterly false and malicious, and declared he should be able completely to disprove it. The first witness whom I called in support of my statement was Ned Culcheth, and he confirmed it in every particular, but the weight which might have been attached to his testimony was a good deal shaken, when Malpas, addressing himself to the bench, said, "You have heard, gentlemen, what this man has stated. Have I your permission to ask him a question, which will throw some light on the motive by which he has been actuated in coming forward against me in this manner?" Permission being granted, he then turned sharply to Ned, and said, "Now, fellow, will you declare upon your oath that you have not sworn to be revenged upon me for some imaginary wrong?"

"It was no imaginary wrong," Ned rejoined.

"That is not an answer to the question," Mr. Mapletoft said. "We do not want to know the nature of the provocation you have received, nor whether it be real or imaginary. But we desire to be informed whether you have ever nourished ill-will towards Captain Sale, and uttered threats against him? In a word, have you borne him a grudge?"

"I can't deny it, your worship," Ned replied.

Mr. Mapletoft lifted up his eyebrows, and glanced at Mr. Vernon.

"May I ask you, gentlemen," Malpas continued, "to call William Weever, Thomas Shakeshaft, and Job Greaseby, all persons of undoubted veracity, and here present, and inquire from them whether they have not heard Culcheth openly threaten my life?"

"You can call them presently for the defence, if you think it advisable," Mr. Mapletoft replied; "but it is scarcely necessary, since the man admits the fact."

"I admit that I dislike him, your worship," Ned cried, "and I won't deny that at one time I should have thought it no great crime to send a bullet through his head. But when I hated him worst I would never have brought a false charge against him, or against any man. I have told nothing but the simple truth."

"Mere assertion," Malpas cried. "I will presently demonstrate to you, gentlemen, not only the improbability, but the impossibility of the charge brought against me. It is a tissue of lies which I shall rend in pieces without difficulty. I will show you that I am the victim of a conspiracy between Mr. Mervyn Clitheroe and this man Culcheth, both of whom are my avowed enemies, and are seeking in this manner to blast my character and injure me. Mr. Clitheroe has declared that he obtained information from a gipsy girl of the supposed meeting at a turf-cutter's hut in Delamere Forest. Where is the girl? Can she be produced to corroborate his assertion?"

"She can," I replied. "She is without."

"Call her," the senior magistrate said.

At this announcement, for which he seemed wholly unprepared, a great change took place in Malpas. His limbs trembled, and he took out his handkerchief to wipe his brow. As Tintwisle proceeded to summon the witness, he gazed anxiously at the door, and when, after a short interval, Rue entered, he addressed a supplicating glance at her, which she answered by an inexorable look. Malpas's discomposure was too evident not to attract the attention of the whole assemblage. The magistrates regarded him with anxiety, and Dr. Sale could not conceal his uneasiness. As to poor Mrs. Sale, she again leaned forward from behind the screen, shuddered, and could scarcely repress a cry of terror as she beheld the fiercely-vindictive look which the gipsy girl fixed upon her son. Every one appeared instinctively to feel that

on Rue's testimony Malpas's fate depended; while no one doubted — not even Malpas himself, I am sure — that her testimony would be adverse to him.

"What questions have you to put to the witness?" Mr. Mapletoft said to me, after Rue had been duly cautioned by Twemlow.

"Let me speak wi' her first, your worship," Ned Culcheth interposed, "seein' as how the matter began wi' me. Did you not meet me," he added to Rue, "on the afternoon of the day before yesterday, at Hob's Hillocks, near Garland Hall?"

"Yes, I saw you there," Rue replied.

"And you told me to convey a message to Mr. Mervyn Clitheroe?"

"I told you to bid him meet me at a certain spot in Delamere Forest, between nine and ten o'clock on the following night," Rue answered.

"For what purpose?" I demanded.

"Stop! stop! not so fast," Mr. Mapletoft cried, checking me.

"I did not mention any purpose," Rue observed; "but I told Ned to say to you, that if you failed to keep the appointment, you would ever after regret it."

"Then you led Culcheth to suppose it was on a matter of importance that you wished to see Mr. Clitheroe?" Mr. Mapletoft asked.

"The matter was important — to me," Rue replied.

"I have no more questions to ask the young woman, gentlemen," Ned observed. "I undertook to convey her message, and I performed my promise. We both went together to the place of meeting she had fixed — the Chamber of the Forest — at the hour appointed. She was there, and had some discourse with Mr. Clitheroe."

"Did you hear what passed between them?" Mr. Mapletoft inquired.

"I did not, your worship," Ned replied. "I was too far off. I could only catch a word here and there; but the young woman seemed wild and angered."

"Angry with Mr. Clitheroe?" the senior magistrate demanded.

"No, not wi' him — wi' Captain Sale," Ned rejoined.

"How do you know that, fellow, if you did not hear what was said?" Mr. Mapletoft cried, sharply.

"I judged so, your worship," Ned returned.

During the progress of the investigation, Rue's gaze never for a moment quitted Malpas, and, judging from the fierce smile that curled her beautiful lip, she revelled in the torture he endured, and would willingly have prolonged it. He still addressed a supplicating look to her, but her glance was unpitying.

"Now, young woman, attend to me," Mr. Mapletoft cried. "What took place during your interview with Mr. Clitheroe? What did you say to him?"

"Much that I cannot relate," she replied.

"That won't do. I must have a direct answer. Ned Culcheth has declared that you appeared angry. Against whom was your anger evinced?"

"Against one who has done me an injury," she returned.

"But you must name the person," Mr. Mapletoft cried.

"I decline to do so," she answered. "It is a matter which relates only to myself."

Malpas was visibly relieved. But his suddenly-awakened hopes were crushed by her looks, which seemed to say, "I have not done yet."

"Harkee, young woman," Mr. Mapletoft called out. "Do

you not see, that by leaving the matter in doubt, you create a prejudice against Mr. Clitheroe? You lead us to suppose you were reproaching him, and we may put an entirely erroneous construction on the object of the meeting."

"You may put what construction you please upon it, sir," she rejoined. "He who has injured me stands before you, but I won't name him."

"Come, woman! speak! Is it Mr. Clitheroe, or Captain Sale?" the magistrate demanded.

"You will get nothing from me on that head," Rue returned.

"Take care, or I will commit you," Mr. Mapletoft cried, angrily.

I now thought proper to interpose. "Allow me," I said to the senior magistrate, "to ask this young woman whether, after our interview, she did not take me and Culcheth to a turf-cutter's hut in the forest?"

"I pointed out the hovel to you," Rue replied, "but I left before you entered it."

"True," I rejoined. "You had previously told me whom I should find there, and the business on which he was engaged; but in order to make sure, you went forward to listen, and returned with the intelligence that he was within."

"I said, 'They were there' — those were my exact words. Ned Culcheth heard me," she rejoined.

"I did," Ned cried. "And I understood you to mean —"

"Never mind what you understood, fellow," Mr. Mapletoft interrupted. "Keep to facts."

Seeing that Rue was unwilling to answer, and attributing her reluctance to a natural desire not to utter anything to criminate her father and brother, I said,

"I will betray no confidence you have reposed in me, and will ask no question that you may not desire to answer, but

on one point you must speak out plainly — Did you not take me to that hut to revenge yourself on Captain Sale?"

As I put this question, there was a profound silence, broken only by a half-suppressed sob from Mrs. Sale. Looking in the direction whence this sound had proceeded, Rue was made aware of the poor lady's presence, and became violently agitated. A sudden revulsion seemed to take place in her feelings.

"It is his mother!" she exclaimed, distractedly. "What have I said? — what have I done?"

"You have said nothing, my poor girl," Mrs. Sale cried. "You will not join in this conspiracy against my son — you will not harm him?"

"For your sake, I will not," Rue rejoined. "Let me go. You will get nothing more from me."

"We will see that anon," Mr. Mapletoft cried. "Madam," he continued, addressing Mrs. Sale, "this interruption is highly improper, and I am obliged to request you to leave the room. Dr. Sale, you will be good enough to take your lady hence." The vicar complied, and opened the door for Mrs. Sale, but ere the poor lady disappeared she threw a look of inexpressible gratitude at the gipsy girl.

In vain after this were interrogations addressed to Rue by the magistrates and myself. She continued obstinately silent, and Mr. Mapletoft's threats to commit her for contumacy were productive of no effect. At last she was removed, but was ordered to be kept in custody by one of the constable's assistants until the examination had concluded.

This peril over, Malpas entirely recovered his courage. Addressing himself to the magistrates, he said it must be sufficiently evident to them that the accusation brought against him was utterly baseless, and made with malicious intent. I had asserted that he was at a hovel on Delamere

Forest on the previous night, but I had been unable to prove it, and he could show that the statement was an entire fabrication. He then called John Baguley, Doctor Sale's butler, who declared that to the best of his belief the captain was in his own room between nine and ten o'clock on the night before. Baguley had not seen the captain — but he had seen a light in his room. Moreover, he had not seen the captain leave the house at all overnight, or heard him return at a late hour. Jem Millington, Malpas's groom, was the next witness, and he swore positively that his master's horse had never been out of the stable on the night before, and he didn't believe his master had gone out at all.

"Now, gentlemen," Malpas said, when the groom had given his evidence, "I have proved, I trust to your satisfaction, that I could not have been out on horseback last night at the time mentioned by my accusers, unless I were possessed of a principle of ubiquity, but what will you say when I venture to affirm that the man I am reported to have shot — Simon Pownall — is alive and unhurt at this moment?"

At this assertion, which was made with surprising audacity, and which perfectly confounded Ned Culcheth and myself, great sensation was created amongst the assemblage.

"Prove that, and there is an end of the matter," Mr. Mapletoft said.

"I will prove it," Malpas cried. "Call Chetham Quick," he added, to the beadle.

Tintwisle went to the door, summoned the witness, and the next moment Chetham stepped into the room. After bowing to the bench, the impudent rascal looked at me and Ned as much as to say that he would speedily extinguish us. And so he did; for he swore most positively that Pownall was alive, and to the best of his belief uninjured. "I have received a letter from him this very day," Chetham said, "and he makes

no mention of an accident of any kind having happened to him, and certainly does not write like a man who had received a mortal wound. He has reasons for keeping out of the way, or I could produce him at this moment."

"What say you to this, sir?" Mr. Mapletoft called out to me.

"I don't believe a word of it," I cried. "No such letter as described could have been written by Simon Pownall. I am quite sure that the shot fired at him by Captain Sale took effect, and both myself and Ned Culcheth saw him drop into the dyke."

"Where you found him, no doubt, this morning?" Malpas rejoined. "You accuse me of assassination, where is the proof that any crime has been committed? — where is the body of the man I am said to have murdered?"

"Has the body been found?" Mr. Mapletoft inquired.

"It has not, sir," I replied. "We carefully searched the dyke this morning, but were unable to discover any traces of the unfortunate man we had seen fall into it — except two articles which probably belonged to him. But these relics were found at some distance from the spot where the crime was committed. The body may have been removed — or Pownall may only have been wounded, and crept out of the dyke — that is possible."

"Pownall is alive, and fully able, I repeat, to contradict this report of his murder," Chetham Quick cried. "There can be no difficulty in producing him if their worships think it necessary, and this inquiry should be adjourned."

"Well, really, gentlemen, I do not think that any case has been made out," Mr. Vernon said. "An *alibi* has clearly been established by Captain Sale, and the man said to be shot proves to be alive, and most likely unhurt. I will not make any comment on Mr. Clitheroe's conduct, or impute motives to him

which may not exist, but certainly he has made a charge which he cannot sustain."

"My opinion is, Mr. Vernon," Mr. Hazilrigge remarked, "that both my young friend Mervyn Clitheroe and Ned Culcheth have been beguiled by evil spirits. You may smile, gentlemen, but I could adduce many instances of similar delusions as related by learned writers — notably, by Thiræus and Robert de Triez. I was present when the dyke was searched this morning, and I came to this conclusion at the time. My opinion is confirmed by what has since occurred. How otherwise, let me ask, can you account for Mr. Clitheroe's conduct? I know him to be utterly incapable of making any false statement — far less of bringing forward a charge like the present, knowing it to be false. Take my word for it, that both he and Ned Culcheth have been deluded. I am glad to find that the individual supposed to be shot is safe and sound, and I hope to see him again."

Old Hazy's observations elicited a smile from the magistrates, but neither of them made a remark. After a few minutes' conference in an under tone, with Mr. Vernon, the senior magistrate said, "We are of opinion that no case whatever has been made out against Captain Sale, and we dismiss the inquiry."

Upon this, the magistrates rose and left the room by the side door, shaking hands with Dr. Sale, and congratulating him as they passed by. The beadle threw open one of the doors at the lower end of the room, and the yeomen went out by it. Old Hazy and Cuthbert Spring had followed the magistrates, and only Major Atherton and myself were left. By this time the vicar had joined his son, and after shaking hands with him, said in a low tone, glancing at me as he spoke,

"If you will follow my advice, Malpas, you will indict your accusers for conspiracy and perjury."

Stung by the remark, and unable to contain myself, I rejoined with some warmth, "Do not imagine that the matter will be allowed to rest here, Dr. Sale. But the next examination must be in a public court."

"It must," Major Atherton cried, coming quickly back from the door, through which he was just about to make an exit — "it must; and I will venture to predict, if the matter is thoroughly sifted, and careful investigations are made in the interim, that if any parties have to be indicted for perjury and conspiracy, it will not be Mr. Mervyn Clitheroe and Ned Culcheth. On the next occasion there must be no suborned hirelings for witnesses. Of Captain Sale's guilt — notwithstanding all that has been alleged to the contrary — I do not entertain the slightest doubt, and I am sure he will not eventually succeed in evading justice."

To this address, which was uttered with stern composure, Malpas seemed disposed at first to make an indignant rejoinder, but he manifestly quailed beneath the major's eagle eye.

"Who are you, sir, that venture to interfere in this matter?" Captain Sale demanded.

"Inquire from your father who I am," the major rejoined, regarding him scornfully. "He will tell you, and will tell you also by what right I interfere. I am a soldier, sir, and have ever borne myself with honour in my profession. No stain attaches to my name. It would be well for you if you could say as much."

"You may be all you assert, sir," Malpas cried, "though as your honour has not been called in question there seems no need to vaunt of it. But whoever you are, you shall

answer with your life for the imputations you have thrown out against me."

"You must first clear your character before you are entitled to demand satisfaction from any man," the major replied. "I should refuse to go out with you."

So saying, Major Atherton turned upon his heel, and was about to leave the room, when Dr. Sale hurried after him and arrested him.

"Stay a moment, sir," he cried — "I did not know you were present. I had not heard of your return." And he then added, in a lower tone, but which, however, reached my ear, "I wish you would come to me. Perhaps this unpleasant matter may be adjusted. Nay, I am sure it can, if we only meet to talk it over. There shall be no difficulty on my part. Even if a great sacrifice is required, it shall be made. Anything is better than the scandal which an inquiry like this must occasion. I am sure you will agree with me, on reflection, that on all accounts — *on all accounts*," he repeated, "this affair had better be hushed up. You would not, I am sure, wish to blast my son's prospects in life."

"The affair cannot be hushed up, sir," the major rejoined, in an inflexible tone — "it has gone too far. But were it in my power to stay further inquiry, I would not. Have you exhibited such generosity yourself as to be entitled to ask for consideration towards your son? I will show him none. Come, sir," he added to me. And taking my arm, we left the justice-room together.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Thaumaturgus again appears on the Scene.

I MUST now press on with my story. Momentous events await me. Nearly a month must therefore be passed over, with a rapid glance at what has occurred during the interval.

Poor Mrs. Mervyn had been laid in her family vault at the Collegiate Church. Though not invited to the funeral, I, nevertheless, attended it, wishing to pay the last mark of respect to one who for years had almost supplied to me the place of a mother. Many sincere mourners were there besides myself — many who had benefited largely by the good lady's generosity and charity, and who deeply deplored her loss, fearing that little was to be expected from her successor. All her old servants and dependents followed her to the grave, and bade a tearful adieu to the best and kindest of mistresses. Poor Molly Bailey wept bitterly, and Mrs. Comberbach was quite as much affected.

The butler's apprehensions, however, that he and Molly Bailey would be summarily dismissed, were soon dispelled. On the day after the funeral, Lady Amicia announced that she meant to make no change whatever at present in the establishment, but should maintain the house on precisely the same footing as heretofore. The arrangements, therefore, of the Anchorite's remained entirely undisturbed; and whatever might be its new mistress's future plans, she allowed no intimation of them to escape her. No increase of servants was made — no carriage ordered — no display of pomp or

state attempted. Lady Amicia and her daughter led a life of strict privacy; and during the short period I have mentioned, there were no visitors to the house that I heard of, except Dr. Foam and Mr. Barton Lever.

But what was most agreeable to Apphia, and reconciled her more than anything else to her new position was, that all intimacy had ceased between her mother and the Sales. Malpas waited until Mrs. Mervyn's funeral had taken place before presenting himself at the Anchorite's, but when he did come, Mr. Comberbach (as the butler subsequently informed me) had the pleasure of saying that her ladyship was not at home to him, and of adding that he needn't give himself the trouble to call again, for her ladyship never would be at home to him — neither would Miss Apphia. Deeply mortified, as may be supposed, Malpas retired, but he attributed the rebuff he had met with, no doubt, to the scandal occasioned by the charge which I had brought against him. On the next day, Dr. and Mrs. Sale drove over to try and explain matters, but with very indifferent success. Lady Amicia gave them at once to understand that a person on whom such grave suspicions rested, as was the case with their son, was wholly unsuited to her daughter, and the match must be peremptorily broken off. Dr. Sale vainly employed all the specious arguments in his power — and Mrs. Sale used true maternal pleadings — Lady Amicia continued inflexible. But though my opponent was thus removed, my own cause did not seem to be materially advanced by his defeat.

Poor John's love affairs were in a more desperate state than mine. Ora's disappointment was excessive when she found that he would not stretch out his hand to grasp the prize offered him. She could not believe in such absurdity and nonsense, and tried to rally him out of his determination. In vain. Then she pouted, grew piqued, and at last fairly

quarrelled with him. As to kind-hearted Miss Hazilrigge, she sided in this instance with her niece. She was sorry for John, but provoked at his stupidity. And I did not wonder at her being so. I felt provoked with him myself. And if he should lose Ora altogether for his folly, I am sure not one young lady in a hundred would sympathise with him. Not be a nobleman when he might, but prefer remaining a poor curate, besides giving up a beautiful heiress! Was there ever such a crazy being?

Since the Anchorite's had passed into Lady Amicia's hands I had never been near the place, neither had I heard directly from Apphia, but I had received many kind messages from her, conveyed through John, to whom she wrote constantly. During the whole of the period I am thus hastily surveying, I had remained in the country, in accordance with the advice of Major Atherton and Cuthbert Spring. After Malpas's examination before the magistrates, we all returned to Owlarton Grange, and on the following day the two gentlemen I have mentioned were closeted with me for some time, and at last the major said, in reply to some rather too hasty remark of mine,

"You must have a little patience, my young friend. Mr. Spring and I have thought the matter well over, and I trust that in a short time we may be able to settle everything satisfactorily for you."

"Say in a month, major," Cuthbert Spring cried. "I am pretty sure that by that time all may be accomplished. And with the conviction that his friends are at work for him, I think this eager young gentleman may be well content to keep quiet for so short a period, and get into no fresh scrapes — if he can help it," he added, with a laugh.

"Well, gentlemen," I replied, "I can only say that I am infinitely obliged to you. Act as you please. You shall have

no interference from me; and I will do my best not to get into any fresh scrape."

"Enough!" the major cried. "In a month's time we hope to have a good account to render you. Remember, you are to be perfectly quiet, or you may mar our projects."

I gave them a fresh assurance on this head, and our colloquy then ended. Later on in the same day the two gentlemen left Owlarton Grange for Cottonborough, where the major told me he should take up his quarters with his friend. While taking leave of me, Cuthbert Spring recommended me to pass as much of my time as I could at the Grange.

"You are always welcome, I know," he said, "and you will find the society here agreeable. I do not wish you to play the spy upon our worthy but eccentric host, but if you observe anything very unusual about him, drop me a line."

I promised compliance with the request.

Major Atherton also took leave of me very kindly, but he rather surprised me by requesting, almost in the same terms as Cuthbert Spring, that if Old Hazy indulged in any unusual eccentricities, I would let him know.

I again promised compliance, though I wondered what they wanted, and began to fancy they must apprehend that the old gentleman was going out of his mind.

And here it may be asked whether the matrimonial arrangement between Cuthbert Spring and Miss Hazilrigge had approached any nearer to a conclusion? Apparently not. Soon after the old bachelor's departure, I happened to be left alone with Miss Hazilrigge, and took the opportunity of inquiring whether Mr. Spring had made up his mind to leave Cottonborough.

"I really can't tell," she replied. "Whenever I press the question, he returns an evasive answer, but he has promised to come to a positive decision within a month. I have given

him clearly to understand that I will never leave the country; so the affair will then be settled, one way or the other."

"Everything, it appears, will be settled in a month," I thought, struck with the coincidence of the time.

As counselled by the two friends to whom I had confided the management of my affairs, I passed the greater part of my time at the Grange. I endeavoured to accommodate matters between Ora and John, but did not find the task very easy of accomplishment. She could not be made to understand that John's reluctance to move out of his present sphere arose partly from extreme humility of character, and partly from a delicate state of health, which made him shrink from mixing with society. Whatever his own feelings might be, she declared, he was bound to sacrifice them for her. He might prefer to remain a poor curate, and if such were his choice, he might continue in a state of single-blessedness so far as she was concerned, for a poor curate she did not intend to marry. She would give him a month to decide. And if at the end of that time he retained his present opinions, she would think no more of him.

So John's fate was to be decided in a month — a term, it seemed, assigned to us all.

Poor John's cottage was no longer the cheerful abode that it had been before his sister's departure. It was brightened by no female presence — and there was no ministering angel at hand to watch over and nurse him. Yet he uttered no murmur, but discharged his duties zealously as ever. He now and then walked over with me to the Grange, but as Ora now received him with great coldness he derived little pleasure from these visits.

And how was Malpas going on all this while? Did he seem affected by the critical position in which he stood? Not in the least, — so far as I could learn. But, in truth, I knew

very little about him. An occasional rumour of his proceedings reached the Grange, and the last thing I heard of him was that he had made a match for five hundred guineas with a certain Captain Brereton, a young gentleman quite as much addicted to sporting pursuits as himself, and that they were to ride a steeple-chase together between Ashley and Nethercrofts. This match, which had excited great interest among the gentry of the neighbourhood, was on the eve of coming off. I rode over to Marston on the very day before it was to take place, and found everybody talking about it.

But before explaining what took me to Marston, it will be necessary to make some mention of Old Hazy, whose proceedings had begun to attract my attention.

The old gentleman often expressed regret at the loss of the *Thaumaturgus*. No one had ever suited him so well. Despite the many proofs he had received of the rascal's mal-practices, he still clung to him, and made excuses for him. According to Old Hazy's showing, Dr. Hooker was an injured man; and so infatuated was the credulous old gentleman, that I felt that the rogue would be able to impose upon him again if he only got the opportunity.

Rather to my surprise, Major Atherton did not write to me at all, the correspondence from Cottonborough being conducted by Cuthbert Spring. One day there came a letter from Mr. Spring, stating that though the police had now been actively employed for more than three weeks, they had failed in discovering Simon Pownall's retreat. On reading this letter to Old Hazy, I observed a singular smile cross his countenance, and he remarked — "Ah! they'll never catch Dr. Hooker."

"I shouldn't care if the rascal did get off," I said, "provided he left the will behind him."

"Give yourself no concern about that," he observed.

"The will will turn up soon. I am sure of it. There are more ways than one of discovering lost treasure," he added, significantly. "And I flatter myself that I am quite as likely to hit upon the right plan as Cuthbert Spring or Major Atherton."

On that same day another circumstance occurred, which confirmed the suspicions aroused within me by the old gentleman's observations. For a long period — ever since the disappearance of the *Thaumaturgus*, in fact — no nocturnal disturbance had occurred at Owlarton Grange; but Mr. Ponder now imparted to me in confidence that he had heard mysterious sounds in the haunted chamber, and he was afraid Jotham Shocklach was about to resume his midnight knockings. At this time, though I passed the greater part of the day at the Grange, I invariably slept at the mill; but after what I had just heard from Ponder, I thought I would try the effect upon Old Hazy of a proposal to occupy the haunted room that night. As I expected, he did not like it at all, made several absurd excuses, and ended by saying that I could have the room to-morrow — but not that night. I felt sure then that my suspicions were correct, but determined to satisfy myself before taking any decided steps.

I took leave of the old gentleman at the usual hour in the evening, but, instead of starting for the mill, I remained in the garden, and concealing myself in the yew-tree alley, did not issue from this retreat till I judged that the inmates of the house had retired to rest. I then came out upon the lawn, and took up a position commanding the large bay-window of the haunted chamber. The night was perfectly dark, so it was not likely I should be perceived. All the lights in the house seemed to be extinguished, and apparently no one was astir.

This state of things continued for more than half an hour, until I heard a clock strike the hour of midnight. Scarcely had the sound ceased, than the window at which I was gazing became suddenly illuminated. Unluckily, the thick curtains, which I have already mentioned in my description of the room, were partially drawn across the deep embrasure, so I could not distinguish what was passing inside. But careful watching soon convinced me that there were two persons in the chamber. One of them, unquestionably, was Old Hazy; and the other, or I was greatly mistaken, was the Thaumaturgus.

But as I could not leave the matter in doubt, I considered how I could ascertain the point without giving the alarm. There was no ladder at hand to aid my investigation as on a former occasion, but I soon found that, by taking advantage of the branches of a large pear-tree which had been trained against the wall, I could reach the window, and I at once put the idea into execution. Proceeding with great caution, I quickly ascended so high that, by grasping a branch of the pear-tree with my right hand, and planting the point of my foot on the window-sill, I was enabled to peep into the room. Still the thick curtain defied my scrutiny. But though I could not see, I could hear; and the voice which reached me was that of Pownall. The rascal was evidently concluding some arrangement with his dupe.

"Well, then," he said, "I am to have the money to-morrow night, provided I put you in possession of all my magical treasures —"

"Not forgetting the will," Old Hazy interrupted. "You mustn't omit that."

"Oh! yes, you may count upon the will," Simon rejoined. "I shan't be sorry to be rid of it. But mind! you are not to

deliver it to young Clitheroe until a month after I am gone. You will pledge your word to that effect?"

"I will," the old gentleman rejoined. "To-morrow night, at the same hour, we will meet again for the last time — but not here — in the summer-house. If you are ready to fulfil your part of the bargain, I will fulfil mine."

"Oh! you needn't be afraid of me," Simon rejoined. "I'm sure to be ready. I'm only too anxious to be off. Though I oughtn't to say so, for you have afforded me a secure asylum."

"Yes, yes, they never thought of looking for you here," the old gentleman replied, with a laugh. "I am not quite sure that I am right in affording you a hiding-place, but I couldn't betray a professor of the occult sciences."

"Of course not," Simon rejoined. "But as I was saying, I want to be off. The wound in my side caused by the pistol-shot is quite healed, and I feel strong enough for the voyage I contemplate to the New World. Ah! if that ball hadn't glanced off my ribs, all would have been up with me. Captain Sale thought he had laid me low, and fancied he had buried his secret in the dyke; but it will rise up against him, when he least expects it. Even now he persuades himself that I will make terms with him, but I will never do so. That will shall never come into his hands. Money shan't buy it him. I will only use it as an instrument of revenge. It will hit more sharply than his pistol-shot. He tried to take my life, and though I won't take his life in return, I'll ruin him."

There was a short pause, during which he no doubt perceived that he had gone too far, and that this injudicious manifestation of his vindictive feelings had startled his companion, for he added, by way of mollifying the old gentleman — "But such sentiments as these are unworthy of a philo-

sopher, and must be repressed. I will strive to bear no man malice — not even Captain Sale.”

“I am glad to hear you say so,” Old Hazy replied. “But you have never explained to me how you escaped that night. How did you contrive to get out of the dyke?”

“It was a wonderful escape to be sure, sir,” Pownall replied; “indeed, it would almost appear that I was born neither to be shot nor drowned. Luckily for me when I fell into the dyke my head remained above water, for I couldn’t stir for some minutes. When I could use my limbs once more, I crawled slowly along the bottom of the trench, until at last I reached a pool, where I crept out, and in doing so lost one of my shoes —”

“Which we found, together with your neckerchief,” Old Hazy remarked. “Pray go on.”

“After resting myself for some time upon the bank, I mustered up strength enough to carry me across the moor, staggered on till I reached the Chester road, where, as good luck would have it, a waggon chanced to be passing at the time on its way to Cottonborough, through Northwich. I told the waggoner I had missed my way across the forest and had got into a bog, and, my appearance confirming the statement, the man believed me, took compassion upon me, and allowed me to get into the back of his wain, and rest myself amidst the straw. He left me at a little roadside inn about a mile from Marston, whence I despatched a messenger with a note to Chetham Quick, who came to me at once.”

“Chetham Quick could safely swear, then — as he did in giving his evidence — that he knew you were alive,” Old Hazy remarked; “but he declared you were unhurt.”

“Chetham would swear black is white if he thought anybody would believe him,” Pownall replied. “The double-dealing rascal is in Captain Sale’s pay. However, I won’t say

anything against him, for he behaved kindly enough to me on that occasion — concealed me in a place of security — dressed my wound—gave me restoratives—supplied me with clothes—money — and whatever else I required. In return, he wanted me to give up the will to Captain Sale. But that wouldn't do. So I took French leave of him a few nights ago, and came to you. And now, sir, I think we had better separate. I am fearful of being discovered. To-morrow at midnight — in the summer-house — all shall be concluded. Then I'll trouble you no longer." And I could tell from the sound that he was moving off.

"You can find your way in the dark?" Old Hazy demanded.

"As easily as a cat," the Thaumaturgus replied.

Listening attentively, I then heard the trap-door let down, and knew which way he had gone. I waited for a moment or two longer, until the closing of the door told me that the chamber was deserted, and then descended.

This was the business that took me to Marston.

CHAPTER XVII.

Fortune at last favours me.

NEXT morning I rode to Marston, as I have stated, and despatched Ned Culcheth to Cottonborough with a letter to Major Atherton, acquainting him with the discovery I had made, and begging him to come over that evening with Cuthbert Spring. I requested them to meet me at the mill at ten o'clock, and to bring an officer with him. I felt sure they would not disappoint me.

Before starting for Marston I had taken the precaution of making such arrangements with Ponder and Stephen Blackden that Pownall could not escape; though indeed I had little uneasiness on that score, for I felt sure the rascal would keep his appointment with Old Hazy. No doubt we could have discovered his hiding-place, but the grand object was to secure the will, and this might have been defeated by any precipitate measures.

On my return, I thought it best to prepare Miss Hazilrigge and Ora for what might occur at night, and very much surprised they both were by my relation. Many odd and unaccountable things as her brother had done, Miss Hazilrigge said, this was the oddest and most unaccountable of all. This juggling Pownall had bewitched him. "However," she said, "I am rejoiced that the rascal is likely to be caught at last, and I sincerely hope that the ridiculous position in which my brother will find himself placed will serve him as a lesson for the rest of his life."

The kind lady then expressed her willingness to act in any way that I might direct her, and I recommended that nothing whatever should be done to excite the old gentleman's suspicions. She promised to keep watch over the household. Ponder, old Finch, and Stephen Blackden had already been taken into my confidence, and could be safely relied upon, but not one of the others were to be let into the secret.

In the course of the afternoon I took an opportunity of examining the summer-house. It was a pretty octagonal structure, situated, as I have already mentioned, on the top of a small mount, and had large windows looking in every direction over the gardens. Internally, this pleasant little structure had a coved ceiling, moulded and painted with frescoes, and the spaces between the windows were decorated in a similar manner. Its sole furniture consisted of some half-dozen rustic chairs and a table; and the latter being covered with a piece of old tapestry which hung down nearly to the ground, immediately suggested a place of concealment to me. The summit of the mount outside the summer-house was flagged, the sides being covered with shrubs, and access was gained to the building by a flight of stone steps.

The rest of the day seemed to pass very slowly, and I wandered about the garden, longing for the arrival of night. Old Hazy did not show himself till dinner-time. He was in particular good spirits, and while we were sitting together over our wine, after the departure of the ladies, he told me, with a very mysterious look, that he felt sure he should soon have good news for me.

"A month hence, I prognosticate you will be a rich man, Mervyn," he remarked, with a laugh.

"Why do you fix that precise time, sir?" I demanded.

"Because I have been casting a horoscope," he replied;

"and I find from the configuration of the planets that your uncle's will will be certainly recovered at that time."

"If recovered at all, it will be so before then," I rejoined.

"No it won't!" he cried, with great emphasis. "Mark my words, it will be found this day month — not a day — not an hour sooner. My calculations never err. If you get it before the period I have named, write me down an ignorant pretender."

"If I *should* chance find it before," I ventured to reply, with a certain significance, "I hope you will never place faith in imprudent pretenders again, sir."

"Ha! what's that?" he exclaimed quickly. "But I know you look upon all professors of occult philosophy as impostors."

"Not without good reason, sir," I rejoined. And here the conversation dropped.

Everything was favourable for the scheme. The night was dark but fine, so the ladies could venture forth into the garden, without any kind of discomfort. Before ten o'clock I went away, having previously arranged with Miss Hazilrigge that a little before mid-night she and Ora, accompanied by the three men-servants, should repair to the *allée verte*, where they would find Cuthbert Spring and Major Atherton. As soon as I gave the signal, which I had agreed to do by sounding a dog-whistle, the whole party were to hurry up to the summer-house, where I doubted not all would be accomplished.

I made haste to the mill, and found that my friends had already arrived, and had brought an officer with them. In anticipation of a successful result, they had given Ned Culcheth orders how to act on the morrow. If the gipsies could be found they were to be secured, and a warrant was to be

obtained for Malpas's arrest, but not to be put in execution until our arrival.

As the night was now advancing, and I was anxious to be at my post, I soon set off back again to the Grange, leaving the others to follow more leisurely. Avoiding the stone bridge in front of the house, I pursued a circuitous route to the stables, where I found Stephen Blackden, and committed my horse to his care. In another moment I was in the garden, and speeding through the dark alley in the direction of the summer-house.

The night was pitch dark. Not a star shone down upon me, but I wanted no guidance, for I knew every inch of the ground, and very soon gained the top of the mount, and entered the little building. It was almost too dark to discern any object in the interior, but after stepping quickly round the room to make sure that no one was there, I proceeded to ensconce myself under the table.

If time had passed slowly before, it now seemed not to move at all, and I do not recollect in the whole course of my life a half-hour so long as that passed under the table in the summer-house.

At length, to my indescribable delight, I heard the stable clock strike twelve. In another moment footsteps were audible outside, and then the door was opened. One of them was come. My heart beat so violently that I had to hold my hand against my side to still it.

After entering the room, the new-comer stood still for a moment, and called out, "Are you here, Dr. Hooker?" Receiving no answer of course, the old gentleman uncovered a dark lantern which he had brought with him, and which he must have hitherto carried under his cloak, and suddenly lighted up the place. I was afraid he might be tempted to look under the table, and so detect my presence, but no such

thought crossed him. Having surveyed the room for a moment, and muttered something to himself, he closed the cover of the lantern, and all became dark again. Then I heard him approach the table, and sit down upon one of the chairs beside it.

For a minute or two he remained perfectly quiet, but after that he began to manifest his impatience in various ways, drummed upon the table over my head, and exclaimed, "Why doesn't he come? It is past the hour. What can have detained him?" Two or three minutes more elapsed, and my neighbour's impatience seemed to increase, while mine most undoubtedly did not diminish. At last a noise was heard outside, and Old Hazy started up, exclaiming, "Ah! here he comes at last!"

Oh! how overjoyed I felt when Pownall's quick step resounded in the room, and I distinguished his voice. My first impulse was to spring from my concealment and seize him, but anxiety to ascertain that he had brought the will with him restrained me.

"Are you there, sir?" he inquired.

"Yes, here I am," Old Hazy replied; "and here I have been for the last quarter of an hour. You're behind time."

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, sir," Pownall rejoined; "but I couldn't come sooner. However, I'm quite ready for you."

"I'm glad to hear it," the old gentleman rejoined. "I'm quite ready too. Let me hear what you have got."

"Open wide your ears then, worthy sir, while I particularise the marvellous contents of this wallet," the other replied. "In it you will find a scroll drawn up by the great Cornelius Agrippa himself; another scroll covered with magical characters for raising spirits, in the handwriting of Dr. Dee. Also Dr. Dee's wondrous piece of crystal."

“Are you sure it is Dr. Dee’s crystal?” Old Hazy cried. “I have seen an extraordinary stone belonging to the illustrious doctor in the possession of a learned friend of mine — the President of the Chetham Society — but I never met with the crystal.”

“Here you will find it, then,” Pownall replied; “you will also find Pope Leo’s magical speculum, and the original compact between Dr. Faustus and the Prince of Darkness, with the doctor’s signature traced in his own blood, and the sign-manual of Satan, with which you are sufficiently familiar, I know, to be able to identify it.”

“But how did you obtain the latter remarkable document?” Old Hazy inquired.

“It is a long story, and I have not time to relate it now,” the other rejoined. “But you may rely upon its authenticity. Then there are curious secrets by Albertus Magnus — secrets never yet revealed to the world; undiscovered treasures by the Lesser Albert; treatises, that have never yet seen the light, by Paracelsus, Cardan, and Michael Scott.”

“Amazement!” the old gentleman exclaimed. “What a wonderful collection you have got together! — and all in that wallet!”

“I have not enumerated half — not a third,” Simon replied; “there is an original treatise on Judicial Astrology by Joseph de Tertiis; and another most remarkable discourse on the interpretation of dreams by the great Artemidorus.”

“You don’t say so? — an unpublished work by Artemidorus!” Old Hazy exclaimed. “Oh! if you had anything unknown to the world by Psellus, or my favourite Robert de Tritz!”

“You will find short treatises by both of them,” Pownall replied.

"I am eager to inspect them," the credulous old gentleman cried. "Dear me! to think that such treasures should exist!"

"You will possess some of the greatest curiosities in the world," Pownall returned. "Necessity alone compels me to part with the collection."

"No doubt of it," Old Hazy said. "Well, I have brought a pocket-book with me containing the sum you require — namely, 500*l.*, — but there is one thing more which you have not yet mentioned, but which I shall require before the money is paid — the will."

"Old Mobberley's rightful will, constituting Mervyn Clitheroe his heir," Pownall cried. "It is here."

And he clapped the parchment upon the table with a report that made every fibre in my frame quiver.

Was the will really there? or did it only belong to the string of fables with which he had been deluding Old Hazy? My misgivings were soon dispelled.

"I must look at that will," the old gentleman said, uncovering the dark lantern, and once more throwing a light upon the scene.

"Yes, look at it, sir! — satisfy yourself that it is all right," Pownall cried; "but pray be quick! The light may betray us."

"I won't be long," Old Hazy rejoined. "Yes, yes, there is no doubt about it. This is the document we have been in quest of so long. This is old Mobberley's rightful will."

Scarcely were the words uttered than I sprang from beneath the table, and stood before the startled pair. The lantern had not been darkened, and the first object that met my view was the will lying partly open upon the table. I instantly seized it, and having secured it, placed the whistle to my lips, and blew a loud call.

Hitherto, not a word had been spoken. Both Pownall and Old Hazy were stupified by my unexpected appearance; but the sound of the whistle recalled Pownall to a consciousness of danger, and he made an effort to fly. In vain. Instantly seizing him, I forced him into a chair. At the same moment lights could be seen without, and several figures appeared at the windows.

"What does all this mean?" Old Hazy cried.

"It means that I am betrayed by you," Pownall cried, in a rage. "I see through it all. I took you for an old idiot — but you have wit enough, it seems, to circumvent me."

Before the old gentleman could make any answer, the door of the summer-house was thrown open, and the interior of the little building was filled by the party I had summoned. The first to enter were Major Atherton, Cuthbert Spring, and the officer.

"Here is your prisoner," I said, consigning Pownall to the latter. "Don't let him slip through your fingers."

"No fear of that, sir," the officer rejoined, putting a pair of hand-cuffs over Pownall's wrists. "I'll forgive him if he gets away from me."

"Have you got the will?" Major Atherton eagerly demanded.

"Yes, here it is," I answered, producing it. "I am righted at last. Here is my title to my uncle Mobberley's property."

"Huzza!" Cuthbert Spring exclaimed. And the joyful shout was repeated by Ponder and the others, while the two ladies clapped their hands.

"Most sincerely do I congratulate you, my dear boy," Major Atherton said. "And I trust that fortune, who has so long regarded you with frowns, will henceforth only smile upon you."

"Let me look at the will for a moment," Cuthbert Spring said. "Yes, I see it's all right. Well, you are a lucky fellow, Mervyn. Two thousand a year — that's your income."

Old Hazy did not say a word, but seemed overwhelmed with confusion. Miss Hazilrigge now addressed him.

"Brother, brother!" she cried, "are you not ashamed of yourself to have been so long the dupe of such a miserable juggler as this?"

The old gentleman made no reply, but hung his head.

"Are you not ashamed of yourself, I say?" his sister repeated.

"I'm not quite such a miserable juggler as you suppose, madam," Pownall cried: the rascal had by this time recovered his assurance. "Your brother is not the only person who has taken me for a conjurer, though I must say," he added, with a laugh, "that he is the most credulous gull I ever met with."

"You hear that, brother?" Miss Hazilrigge cried. "You hear what the impudent rascal calls you?"

"Yes, I hear it," the old gentleman groaned.

"I could make him swallow anything," Pownall cried, chuckling. "He believes that yonder wallet contains Dr. Dee's crystal, Pope Leo's speculum, Dr. Faustus's compact with Satan, together with unpublished treatises by all his favourite writers on occult philosophy — ha! ha! ha!"

"What! you have told me a pack of lies, eh?" Old Hazy cried. "There are no magic scrolls — no crystal — no speculum — no diabolic compact — no treatises by Artemidorus, Psellus, Robert de Triez, and the others?"

"You had better look for them," Pownall rejoined, coolly.

"Oh! you prodigious villain! Oh! you arch deceiver! I'll strangle you!" the old gentleman cried, with an explosion of rage. And he might have executed his threat if we had not stopped him. "Oh, sister!" he added, "how egregiously I have been duped. Well may this rascal call me an old idiot. I merit the appellation."

"You will be a wiser man in future, I am quite certain, brother," Miss Hazilrigge replied, kindly. "I have hopes of you now."

"If my good friend will only forswear his books of magic, witch-craft, and judicial astrology, and avoid such society as he has here formed, his cure will be complete," Cuthbert Spring remarked.

"I'll do it!" Old Hazy exclaimed. "I'll burn all my books to-morrow. I won't keep one of them."

"Not even Robert de Triez?" I asked, with a smile.

"Not even Robert," he answered, firmly.

"I shall hold you to your promise, brother," Miss Hazilrigge said. "You hear what your master says, Ponder. ALL the books in his study are to be burnt." And she gave him some private directions in an under tone.

"I shall be very glad to do it, ma'am," the butler replied; "and to clear the house of all such vermin as have so long infested it," he added, with a glance at Pownall.

"Since things have taken this turn," Cuthbert Spring remarked, "any objections I might have had to a country life are removed. I shall give up Cottonborough."

"And come to Owlarton Grange. Delighted to hear you say so!" Old Hazy exclaimed. "I hope soon to call you brother-in-law."

"Oh! pray don't talk in that way?" Miss Hazilrigge cried.

"You can't expect my uncle to spare your blushes, aunt," Ora said, "after taking him to task so sharply as you have just done."

"Hold your tongue, you saucy minx!" the elderly spinster rejoined.

"Well, gentlemen," Old Hazy said to the major and Mr. Spring, "you have taken me a little by surprise, but you shall have the best accommodation I can offer you. You will sleep at the Grange, of course?"

"Of course they will, brother," Miss Hazilrigge interposed. "I expected them, and have provided accordingly."

"Yes, we must trespass upon your hospitality to-night, Mr. Hazilrigge," Major Atherton observed. "Our work is not ended. We have more to do to-morrow."

"I hope you won't let Captain Sale and the two gipsies escape, gentlemen," Pownall cried. "Only confront me with them, and you shall hear what nice disclosures I will make."

"You shall have an opportunity of speaking out, depend upon it," Major Atherton rejoined. "Mr. Hazilrigge, I must beg your permission to keep this rascal here to-night in custody of the officer. By this time to-morrow, he will be lodged, I trust, with his three accomplices, in Chester gaol."

"Stephen Blackden shall put him in the farm-house, and keep watch over him with the officer," the old gentleman replied. "And now, since we have nothing more to detain us here, suppose we adjourn to the house."

"You will find supper ready for you," Miss Hazilrigge said. "I am sure dear Mr. Spring will be all the better after

his journey for a slice of cold chicken and a glass of champagne — and so will the major."

"Upon my word, you are very considerate, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," the old bachelor rejoined, gallantly offering her his arm.

We had a very merry supper that night, and my health was drunk in foaming bumpers of champagne by all the party.

I slept that night in the haunted chamber — and haunted I was, not by Jotham Shocklach, but by my uncle Mobberley. Before retiring to rest, I had read over the will and placed it for better security under my pillow — so no wonder I dreamed of him who made it.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Steeple-Chase.

I AWOKE next morning in a very strange state of mind. For a few moments I could not believe in the occurrences of the previous night. Had I indeed become suddenly wealthy? Was I really possessed of two thousand a year? Was Nethercrofts mine at last? The will might have disappeared like a fairy favour. To satisfy myself, I thrust my hand beneath the pillow, and brought it forth. Yes, there it was beyond all question. I opened it and began to read it again, though by this time I was perfectly familiar with its contents. Blessings on him! my dear old uncle Mobberley had constituted me his heir. In all other respects the will corresponded with that which had been acted upon — the various bequests made in both instruments being identical, with one material exception. I hugged the precious parchment to my bosom, and thought I would never let it out of my possession. I am ashamed to relate the follies I committed. I sang, laughed — even wept — with delight. Springing out of bed, I began to caper about the room, and was still exercising my limbs in this manner when the door suddenly opened and Ponder entered. As I did not immediately desist from my saltatory performance, but even bounded about with increased vigour, the sedate butler gazed at me in perfect bewilderment, showing by his countenance that he thought I must have taken leave of my senses.

"Give me joy, Ponder!" I exclaimed — "give me joy! I am just come into two thousand a year."

"I am quite aware of it, sir," the butler replied; "and the fortunate circumstance may account for your exhilaration."

"I mean to make everybody about me happy and comfortable," I continued. "I have a great regard for you, Ponder — a particular regard — and shall evince it by making you a handsome present."

"Very much obleeged to you, I'm sure, sir," he replied, bowing respectfully. "But excuse me for saying, that I hope now you've come into your property that you'll take care of it."

"I mean to do so, Ponder," I replied. "But I thank you for your excellent advice, and will double the gratuity I intended to make you."

The butler again bowed, and I executed a pirouette before him.

"Shall I open the window, sir?" he asked, beginning to be slightly alarmed.

"By all means, Ponder," I replied. "A little fresh air will be agreeable. By-the-by, has he escaped?"

"Who, sir — the prisoner?" he exclaimed. "Oh, no! we have him safe enough."

"I'm sorry for it," I rejoined.

"What! sorry he has not escaped, sir?" he cried, staring at me.

"Well, it is odd, Ponder," I said, rather more calmly; "but I feel so uncommonly happy just now, that I can't bear to think of anybody being miserable. I wish Pownall had got off."

"That would never do, sir," he replied, gravely. "Such a rascal mustn't be allowed to go at large. He doesn't seem

to be much concerned at his position, and his main anxiety appears to be that Captain Sale and the gipsies should be taken. He talks of all he has done with great freedom to the officer, and says he means to make a clean breast of it. By-the-by, you'll be glad to hear, sir, that all my master's books of magic and witchcraft are burnt."

"What, *all* his treasures, Ponder?" I cried, becoming suddenly tranquil.

"Every one of 'em, sir," he replied. "Not a single volume has been spared. Miss Hazilrigge was fearful he might change his mind, and bade me set to work the first thing, so I called up the men at four o'clock this morning — long before the old gentleman opened his eyes — and we made a great bonfire in the yard, and threw all the abominable rubbish into it. A precious lot of musty old books there was, sir. We filled a large clothes-basket choke full wi' 'em more than a dozen times. One of the last we threw into the fire was that big black book, which he used to call the Devil's Grammar" (Mr. Ponder meant the Grimoire), "and you should have seen how it hissed and crackled. You'd ha' thought it had got into its natural element. You may smell the smoke of the bonfire even here. My master will never behold his treasures again — and a good job too! — but Pownall saw the last of 'em, for the window of the room in which he is confined looks out into the yard, and he and the officer perceiving the blaze, came forward to ascertain what we were doing. You should have seen how the old rascal grinned as we cast basketful after basketful of books into the fire."

"Well, I hope your master won't be angry, Ponder," I said.

"No fear of that, sir," he replied. "When I went into his room just now I told him what I had done, and he said it was all right. He would never have had the heart to give the order

for the execution himself, he declared, but he was glad it was over. I do verily believe, sir, that henceforth my master will be a very different person. His eyes seem fairly opened at last, and if he gets rid of his eccentricities and oddities, he will be one of the best and kindest men breathing."

"He is that already, Ponder," I replied. "But I am delighted with what you tell me about him."

Shortly afterwards, the butler left me, and as soon as my toilet was completed I came down stairs, having by this time regained my customary composure. I could not make up my mind to part with the will, but kept it in a place of safety about my person.

When we met at breakfast I received the warmest congratulations from the whole party, and little else was talked about except my good luck. Miss Hazilrigge and Ora laid out the most delightful plans for my future life, in which, as a matter of course, Apphia was included, and I was so intoxicated with success, that I began to fancy that everything would turn out exactly as they arranged it.

"I despair of nothing now, my dear Miss Hazilrigge," I said. "Still there is a great difficulty to be overcome in the person of Lady Amicia Wilburton."

I observed Major Atherton and Cuthbert Spring exchange significant looks when I made this observation, and the latter remarked, with a smile,

"I don't think your case quite so hopeless now as heretofore, Mervyn. As possessor of Nethercrofts, Lady Amicia may be more favourably disposed towards you. Let us get over the business of to-day, and we will then turn our attention to that important point."

Old Hazy was in excellent spirits. I had never seen him more cheerful — so it was evident that the destruction of his once-beloved books did not weigh upon his mind. I should not

have ventured to say anything to him on the subject, but he referred to it himself, declaring that he would never again read a treatise on the occult sciences. And I may add that he has kept his word.

This being the day appointed for the steeple-chase, we knew where to find Malpas. The race was to be run at three o'clock, and before that hour we meant to be upon the ground. From what Ned Culcheth had stated to my two friends there was little doubt that Phaleg and his son would be captured at the same time.

At noon we started for Marston — Old Hazy in his antiquated barouche, with Major Atherton and Cuthbert Spring; Pownall and the officer in the post-chaise, which had been retained for the purpose. I rode on before the others, wishing to call at Weverham, and acquaint John with the good news. He was equally surprised and delighted by my relation.

"You are, indeed, most fortunate, Mervyn," he said, "and I pray that you may live long to enjoy your newly-acquired property."

I thanked him heartily, and said that I only required one thing now to make me entirely happy — his sister's hand.

"If that is all you lack to complete your felicity," he replied, with a kindly smile, "I do not think it will be wanting. Do not question me further. I may not speak."

I left my friend full of joyous anticipations — the only drawback to which was my incertitude as to the conclusion of his own love affair. I had not ventured to introduce the topic, having nothing satisfactory to communicate.

As I returned to the highway, on quitting the village of Weverham, I came upon the barouche and post-chaise, and

after chatting for a short time with the occupants of the former vehicle, galloped on in advance.

Oh! how I enjoyed that ride! Everything took a colour from the sunshine in my breast. The landscape brightened and revealed beauties and picturesque combinations which I had not hitherto discerned in it. Not a sound — not an object but yielded me delight. All seemed in harmony with my own blissful feelings. Even the consideration of the unpleasant task on which I was bound did not obtrude itself upon me, until I came within half a mile of Marston, when I was reminded of it by seeing Ned Culcheth.

The trusty fellow was seated on a bench in front of a little wayside inn, and as I came in sight, he started up and ran towards me. On learning that I had got the will, he took off his cap, and waved it over his head with a prolonged and joyous shout. After this demonstration of delight, he held out his honest hand to me, and I grasped it cordially. He then tried another shout, but this time his voice failed him, and he was obliged to brush the moisture from his eyes.

“Hang it!” he exclaimed, “I don’t know how it be. I never felt so glad in all my life, and yet I must needs be snivelling. This will be rare news for Sissy, and for all Marston, when they come to hear it.”

“I dare say they can give us a glass of good ale yonder, Ned?” I said, pointing to the little inn.

“As good as any in Cheshire,” he responded.

“We’ll try it, then,” I said. “You must drink my health.”

Upon this we repaired to the inn, where I alighted, and Ned emptied a glass of the nut-brown beverage to my health and happiness. When the honest fellow’s enthusiastic delight had somewhat abated, I questioned him as to the steeple-chase. He told me that no change had taken place in the

arrangements, but that the match was to be run at three o'clock, as appointed, and that Captain Sale was expected to win it.

"He may win the race, Ned," I remarked, "but he will lose all else — honour and liberty. What of the gipsies?"

"Captured by this time I make no doubt, sir," he replied. "They have been seen this morning, and the officers are after 'em."

"And Malpas has no suspicions, you think, Ned, that a warrant has been obtained for his arrest?"

"None whatever, sir," he rejoined. "I wouldn't trust Bryan Peover, so I placed it in the hands of Mike Heron, the Knutsford constable. Mike won't hesitate to do the business. Captain Sale has been stayin' for the last week wi' his uncle Squire Vernon, at Fitton Park, and not half an hour ago I met one of the squire's keepers, who told me the captain is in wonderful spirits, and makes sure of winnin' 1000*l.* by the match."

While we were thus conversing, the barouche came up, and was brought to a halt, as was the post-chaise that followed it containing the prisoner. Pownall was at once recognised by the keeper of the wayside inn, which proved to be the house where the caitiff had been left by the waggoner on the night of his escape from the dyke.

A brief consultation was then held as to the course to be pursued. Major Atherton and Cuthbert Spring were for arresting Malpas at once, but Old Hazy pleaded hard that he should be allowed to run the race.

"Don't deprive him of the amusement," he said. "It may be the last race he will ever run."

The last race he would ever run! Little did the old gentleman deem how prophetic were the words he uttered.

After a short halt, we went on, Ned getting up in front of the postchaise. Very few persons noticed us as we passed through Marston. The village was almost deserted, the majority of the inhabitants having gone to witness the race. Simon Pownall, who was anxious to elude observation, leaned as far back as he could in the chaise, but he was recognised notwithstanding by more than one old acquaintance.

Our road took us past Nethercrofts. As we passed by the old farm-house, I saw Hannah standing at the orchard gate, and could not help stopping to tell her of the extraordinary changes that had taken place. When she heard that my uncle Mobberley's rightful will had been found, and that I was now incontestable heir to the property, she held up her hands and screamed with delight, calling out, "Well, to be sure! Who'd ha' thought it?" Her husband, William Weever, she told me, was gone to see the race, and I should most likely meet him on the ground. She would answer for it he would be rarely pleased with the news.

After bestowing a glance at the dear old farm-house, enchanted to think that I could now call it my own, I hastened after the others, and overtook them at the bottom of a gentle descent which had brought them within a short distance of the mere. My breast swelled, for all I saw was mine — those rich meads and pleasant pasture-land, and that picturesque coppice, running down to the borders of the lake, all belonged to me.

We went on for nearly a quarter of a mile further, and I was still on my own ground, when we came to the locality of the steeple-chase.

On the summit of a gentle eminence on the right, about half a mile off, which eminence commanded a complete view of the whole line of country marked out for the race, a stand had been erected. Close to it were three or four booths. The

entire crown of the hill and part of the sides were occupied, as at a regular race, by a throng of spectators on horseback or on foot, mixed up with vehicles of various kinds, from the landau and phaeton to the gig and taxed-cart. Of horsemen there could not have been fewer than three or four hundred, while of persons on foot there must have been double that number. Plenty of witnesses, I could not help thinking, of Malpas's approaching disgrace.

The stand was filled with spectators — chiefly ladies, most of them, no doubt, wives and daughters of the neighbouring gentry — and above it floated a large flag. The course to be taken by the riders in the race was indicated by tall flagstaffs planted at various points, and seemed to have been skilfully planned, as it offered many difficulties, while at the same time there were plenty of open spaces left, over which the horses could stretch well out, and make good trial of their speed. As we came in sight of the hill loud shouting was heard, and great commotion was perceptible among the horsemen, several of whom were riding to and fro, proving that the race was just about to begin.

Both vehicles were at once brought to a halt, and while the others were alighting I dashed through a gate into a large field on the right, at the bottom of which flowed a brook, forming the boundary of the Nethercrofts estate. This brook, as was shown by the flagstaff on the opposite bank, had to be crossed by the riders, and at a place of great hazard. Not only was the stream upwards of thirty feet wide at this point, but its banks were broken, while there were several old pollard-willows that seemed to stand right in the way, and great caution would be required to avoid these trees while making a jump. Altogether it was a most awkward spot, as I saw at a glance. Indeed, I knew the place well, having often angled in the brook. In anticipation of mischief, a

number of lookers-on had collected on the further side of the brook, while some adventurous country bumpkins and lads had clambered up the pollard-trees in hopes of obtaining a better view. I was about to ride down the field, when my attention was directed to a group consisting of some half-dozen men, with a woman near them. In the latter I at once recognised Rue, and I knew who the others must be.

As I advanced, I descried Phaleg and his son with an officer on either side of them. Both gipsies were handcuffed. Poor Rue, who was evidently much cast down, looked reproachfully at me, but did not speak. I could not but feel compassion for her. The constables told me, with a laugh, that they had pounced upon the ruffians the moment they entered the field. Mike Heron, the Knutsford constable, now came forward, and touching his hat, asked if I had any orders to give him. I told him to go up to the stand, near which the winning-post was situated, and as soon as the race was over, to arrest Captain Sale. Mike departed on his errand forthwith.

By this time Major Atherton and the others had come up, bringing Pownall with them in charge of the officer. On finding that his accomplices were captured, Pownall testified his extreme satisfaction and commenced jeering them bitterly. The gipsies scowled at him, but made no reply to his taunts.

After a moment's debate, it was decided that we should station ourselves near the pollards, so I dismounted, and leaving my horse in charge of a farming lad, we moved down in a body towards the brook, the officers following us with the three prisoners.

Scarcely had we taken up a position, when a bell was rung, informing us that the riders had started, and we presently caught a glimpse of them speeding across the clear space on the near side of the mill. At this moment Captain

Brereton took the lead, though Malpas was not far behind him. Both were in jockey-dresses, Malpas wearing a blue cap, with a white jacket crossed by a broad sky-blue stripe, and his opponent a white cap and pink jacket. As far as could be judged, they seemed pretty well matched in regard to horses, and both rode remarkably well. Two flights of hurdles were cleared in no time, and then we lost sight of them both for a few moments. Over a stiff fence they both came at last, doing their work in gallant style, but Malpas was now ahead, and kept his place as they flew across the open. On — on — on. They were now within a hundred yards of the brook, and were greeted by the cheers of the spectators. Malpas's name was chiefly coupled with the shouts. He still led, and the cries were that he would win.

Despite the peculiar circumstances in which I stood in reference to one of the riders, it was impossible not to be interested in so well-contested a race. I approached the side of the stream the better to observe them, and my example was followed by Major Atherton and Cuthbert Spring. In this position I think I must have caught the eye of Malpas, though I cannot be sure, but it seemed to me that he noticed me, and slightly swerved. Be this as it may, a sudden flush overspread his countenance, which had hitherto been pale with excitement. However, he held on unfalteringly. He was now full twenty yards in advance of Captain Brereton, and the crowd of spectators collected at this point cheered him as winner. With these shouts ringing in his ears he charged the brook.

From the style in which his horse jumped I thought the animal would have landed him in safety — but I was mistaken. A terrible crash told me that an accident had happened. But I scarcely saw it, for all passed like a vision before my swimming eyes. The horse was down, and Malpas was lying,

stunned and bleeding, and with fast-approaching death written in unmistakable characters on his countenance, at the foot of one of the pollard-trees, against which he had been dashed. A moment before he had been full of power, pride, triumph — now he lay there helpless as a crushed worm — dying!

In the midst of the fearful outcries occasioned by this disastrous occurrence, Captain Brereton, who could not, of course, check himself, leaped the brook, and with better luck than Malpas, landing upon a firm spot on the bank, and, avoiding the pollards, went on, shouting that he would bring medical aid directly. But it would be of no use. All the surgeons in Cheshire, or in England, could not help Malpas now.

As soon as Captain Brereton was out of the way, we rushed to Malpas, but he besought us not to move him, for his agony was excruciating. At this moment, a piercing shriek arose, and Rue rushed forward. Her wrongs were forgotten, and all the tenderness she had once felt for her betrayer returned to her breast. Kneeling beside him, she took his head gently upon her lap, and strove by every means in her power to alleviate his sufferings. Aware who was near him, the dying man thanked her by his looks.

The scene, which produced an ineffaceable impression upon me, now rises before me with its minutest details. I see Malpas stretched upon the bank, at the foot of the pollard-willow, groaning with agony — with no power of movement in his well-shaped limbs. What a contrast does his gay attire offer to his ghastly looks! He is supported by the poor gipsy girl whom he has wronged, who watches him with intense anxiety, and would lay down her life to save him. Behind, stands his groom, holding his unlucky steed, which is but slightly injured. Amongst the spectators of the accident are

many who have known the dying man, and are affected in various ways. Cuthbert Spring and Old Hazy, who are standing near the sufferer, seem quite horrified by the dreadful occurrence, and so does Ned Culcheth, but Major Atherton looks grimly on. He has seen death too often on the battlefield to be moved. But there is another group on which the spectacle might be expected to produce a powerful effect — a group consisting of the reckless young man's evil associates, Simon Pownall and the gipsies. How are they affected? Phaleg and his son look on with sullen unconcern, and the vice-hardened countenance of the elder gipsy displays no emotion whatever. Obed is not quite so stoical, but even he has a callous look. But Pownall, who is seated on the ground, averts his gaze, and tries to stop his ears with his manacled hands. All his cynicism is gone.

Such was the aspect presented by the various groups gathered around the dying man. For myself, I can affirm that I was dreadfully shocked, and that feelings of commiseration were paramount to all others in my breast.

Malpas at last made me out, and fixing his glazing eyes upon me, faltered forth:

“Have you got it? — the will!”

“It is here!” I cried, exhibiting the document to his failing gaze.

His looks expressed satisfaction, and he said faintly,

“It is well. I shall die easier for your forgiveness, Mervyn.”

“You have it, Malpas,” I rejoined, taking his helpless hand in mine. “I forgive you from the bottom of my heart.”

He thanked me by a look, for his stiffening fingers could not return my pressure.

"Let me have yours too, Rue?" he said, with a last effort.

She gave it him at once, and with a passionate outburst of grief that attested the depth of her affection.

Unwilling to behold this heart-rending spectacle, I looked away for a moment, when a piercing cry smote my ears, and told me what had occurred. Malpas was gone to his account.

Shriek after shriek followed from the unfortunate gipsy girl — each more harrowing than that which had gone before it. At last she flung herself despairingly upon the lifeless body of her lover.

Even the rugged breast of Phaleg was touched by his daughter's affliction, and he implored the officers to let him go to her. As to Obed, he was so violently excited that he broke from the constable who held him, and rushed towards Rue, when he was again seized. It was a frightful scene, and I felt so heart-sickened that I rushed away.

Seeing how painfully I was affected, Major Atherton immediately followed me, and by the kindest solicitude tried to restore me. He remarked that, distressing as the occurrence might be, it was better for himself — better for all connected with him — that Malpas had died thus. The major then recommended me to go to Nethercrofts.

"Go and take possession of the old house at once," he said. "Stay there to-night. Your tenants will make you up a bed — and they must manage to make up a bed for me as well, for I intend to claim your hospitality. Don't remain any longer here. I will take all disagreeable business that remains to be done off your hands, and will explain to Mr. Hazilrigge and Cuthbert Spring that I have sent you away."

"But I shall see you again soon?" I said.

"You shall see me to-night," he replied. "You remember where you first beheld me?"

"Perfectly. At my mother's grave in Marston churchyard."

"Come to that hallowed spot at nine o'clock this evening," he replied. "You will find me there. I have a secret to reveal to you." And without another word, he turned away and rejoined our friends.

I had just mounted my horse, and was about to ride off to Nethercrofts as I had been enjoined by this singular man, who exercised such an extraordinary influence over me, when Ned Culcheth came up, and after a few remarks, said,

"What a strange thing it be, sir, that Captain Sale should meet his death at yonder spot."

"Why stranger there than elsewhere, Ned?" I asked.

"Because the Nethercrofts estate begins at that point," he rejoined. "No sooner does he touch the land he has coveted, and has striven to wrest from the rightful owner, than his horse dashes him against a tree, and he dies at the foot of the man he has wronged. It looks like a judgment."

I made no reply, but the words sank deep into my breast.

CHAPTER XIX.

Once more at the Grave.

WHILE crossing the fields that night from Nethercrofts to keep my appointment with Major Atherton, I was strangely agitated. What was the nature of the revelation to be made to me? Certain notions had sometimes crossed me in regard to this inscrutable personage, but they seemed so wild and extravagant that I did not dare to indulge them. Accordingly, I had dismissed them as soon as formed. But now they came back upon me with greater force than ever. The truth seemed suddenly to flash upon me. And I hurried on, eager to turn my conjectures into certainties.

Full of hope, and with a breast beating with new-born emotions, I passed through the little gate opening upon the churchyard. A wan moon, struggling through passing clouds, feebly illumined the place. By this scanty light I could distinguish that he was standing near the grave, and I flew towards him.

He did not keep me a moment in suspense, but held out his arms as I approached.

"My son! my dear son!" he exclaimed.

"My father! my dear father!" I rejoined, rushing into his embrace.

Profound emotion kept us silent for some minutes. He then spoke:

"When you beheld me that night—though I little thought you were present at the time—I registered a vow on this spot

that the rest of my life should be devoted to my son. Since then you have been the sole object of my thoughts. But wishing to study your character and disposition from a point of view which circumstances enabled me to take, I presented myself to you as a stranger; and I continued the part I had commenced, because I desired to see how you would act at a critical conjuncture — contenting myself with looking passively on, but ever ready to come to your assistance in case of need. Had not your mind been greatly engrossed by other matters, you must have discovered me. More than once I have been on the point of acknowledging myself to you, but I have checked myself, because I had determined that the disclosure — which has been, perhaps, too long delayed — should be made on this spot — that here, in your dear mother's presence, as it were, I would avow myself your father, and give you my benediction. 'Take it, my son,' he added, spreading his arms over me, "and if a blessed spirit can be permitted to hover unseen over the living, be assured that your mother is near us now. Kneel down, my son — kneel down — and let us pray!"

On this we both bent the knee reverentially, and continued for some time occupied in fervent devotion. Perchance a gentle spirit *did* look down upon us the while.

My father was the first to rise. When I quitted my kneeling posture, and gazed into his countenance, its habitual sternness had given way to an expression of mildness and benevolence. He again embraced me, and with increased affection. We remained for some time longer near the grave. He had much to say, and wished to say it there. For it seemed to both of us that there was an unseen listener to our converse.

My father told me what had brought him back to England. Death had been busy around him in the burning land he had

quitted. Wife and children had all perished from one of those dire scourges that in India decimate a city. He was away from them at the time, and when he returned to Lahore, where he had left them, all were gone. His thoughts then naturally reverted to his son in England, and feelings of affection, hitherto repressed or diverted into other channels, sprang up at once in his bosom. Of his son's precise position he was almost ignorant, for of late the young man had failed to write; while the accounts he received from his ever-active correspondent, Cuthbert Spring, were neither very clear nor very satisfactory. He would go to England. Why should he stay longer in India? He had wealth enough, and had seen service enough. He would retire from the army. His resolution was acted upon; and as soon as the necessary arrangements for his departure could be completed—and they were got through with all possible despatch—he returned to his native land. He had given no intimation of his return to any one—not even to Cuthbert Spring; but on his arrival in London he wrote to his friend, begging him to come up to him. From Cuthbert he learnt all particulars of his son, and what he heard brought him quickly to Cottonborough with his friend. His first visit had been paid to the grave in Marston churchyard, where I had seen him. The rest I knew.

Such was the recital made to me by my father as we stood together on that hallowed spot.

At its close, he knelt down again, pressed his lips to the monumental stone, and walked slowly away, motioning me to follow him. He did not proceed towards the little gate by which I had entered the churchyard, but moved in the opposite direction, until at last we stood opposite the vicarage.

“There is the house of mourning,” he said; “and if you could enter it, you would find a mother wailing for her only

son — a father prostrated by affliction. I have little commiseration for the worldly vicar whose pride has been thus humbled, but I sincerely pity Mrs. Sale. A worse calamity might, however, have befallen her. If she knew all, she might not deplore her son's death. I saw the lifeless body borne home upon a hurdle, and heard the mother's cry of anguish on beholding it. It wrang my heart as much as that poor gipsy girl's frantic ejaculations had wrung it before to-day, and I was glad to get away."

What he said conjured up such a painful scene to my imagination, that I involuntarily made a movement to depart, and he withdrew with me at once.

On our way to Nethercrofts, where we were both to pass the night, my father informed me that Pownall and the gipsies had been taken to Chester. And I may add, as this will be the last time of mentioning them, that all three met the punishment due to their offences. The gipsies got two years of imprisonment with hard labour; while the Thaumaturgus had an opportunity offered him of visiting Australia — free of expense.

CHAPTER XX.

At Home at the Anchorite's.

ABOUT a week after the events last recorded¹, between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, my father and myself drove from the hotel at which we were staying in Cottonborough to the Anchorite's. We made rather a gay turn out, for we occupied a stylish chariot which Colonel Clitheroe had just received from town, with a footman on the box in a dark undress livery, and with a cockade in his hat. A pair of spanking greys, driven by a smart-looking postilion in a scarlet jacket and irreproachable leathers, soon made their way through the crowded streets, rattled across the iron bridge over the Ater, bowled along the Broughton road at the rate of ten miles an hour, and almost before we had time to think of it, brought us to our destination.

There were two other carriages under the trees at a little distance from the entrance to the Anchorite's, one of which I recognised as Dr. Foam's old-fashioned yellow chariot, but the other was a very handsome equipage indeed, with a remarkably stout, consequential-looking coachman, and a powdered footman, both in rich liveries, seated on the hammercloth. I noticed that this carriage had an earl's coronet on the panels.

Meantime, our footman had rung the bell, and the summons was answered by Mr. Comberbach, arrayed in a handsome suit of sables, with aiguillettes on his shoulder, and having an important and almost majestic air. The butler

was attended by two other men-servants, likewise attired in black, but I was glad to perceive that the inauspicious-looking Fabyan Lowe was not one of them. Mr. Comberbach advanced towards my father as he alighted, and having respectfully saluted him, accorded me a most smiling welcome.

Ah! how different were my feelings as I now entered the gate of the old house from those I had experienced when passing through it last! Now all looked bright and smiling. As Mr. Comberbach marched with more than his usual pomp along the broad gravel-walk, he ever and anon cast a bland and benign look at me, and just before reaching the porch, he stayed his stately step, and said,

"Her ladyship is on the garden terrace near the river, Colonel Clitheroe, and if you please, sir, I will conduct you to her at once. But perhaps," he added, with a glance at me — "perhaps it may be agreeable to you, Mr. Mervyn, to see Miss Apphia first."

"By all means, Comberbach," I replied, eagerly. "You anticipate my wishes."

"Have the goodness to come up-stairs with me to the library, then," he said. "No necessity for disguise now," he added, in a low tone.

"I will wait here for you, Mervyn," my father remarked, with a smile. "You can dispense with my company, I am sure. Go, my boy. Success attend you!"

I thanked him with a smile, and while he walked into the dining-room, I followed the butler up-stairs, and was ushered by him into the library. As soon as we had entered the room, Mr. Comberbach unbosomed himself in this wise:

"Well, sir, things have turned out much better than I expected. Her ladyship makes a very good missis — a little

overbearing at times, but nothin' to complain of. We've got rid of that prying rascal, Fabyan Lowe. Molly still keeps her place, and is likely to keep it, for she has got used to her ladyship's ways, and knows how to please her. We shall never have such another missis as dear Mrs. Mervyn — but it's no use grievin'. We must make ourselves as comfortable as we can in this Vale of Tears. And talking' o' that, sir, I have at last made up my mind to marry —"

"Molly Bailey," I suggested.

"Right, sir," he replied — "right. Miss Apphia has kindly obtained her ladyship's consent to our espousals — so as there is now no impediment we shall soon be man and wife. We have been already asked at the Old Church. Ours has been a longish engagement, Mr. Mervyn, — well-nigh thirty years. I wouldn't recommend you to wait so long, sir," he added, with a knowing look.

"I don't mean to do so, Comberbach," I replied. "You must look quick, or I shall be married before you. But tell me! — who is with her ladyship in the garden?"

"Lord bless me, sir! don't you know? I thought Colonel Clitheroe would have told you. Didn't you see the carriage at the gate? It's her ladyship's father, the old Earl of Rossendale, and her brother, Lord Leyland. They've been staying in Cottonborough for the last three days. Dr. Foam is with them in the garden. Other company are expected, and a cold collation is laid out in the dining-room. The Rev. Mr. Wilburton is here, sir."

What else he might have informed me I know not, for at this moment the inner door opened, and as Apphia and her brother entered from it, the loquacious butler took flight.

She was dressed in deep mourning, which seemed to suit her somewhat serious style of countenance and sedate deport-

ment better than gayer apparel would have done. When I say serious, I am almost afraid of conveying a wrong impression of her looks, which wore a gentle pensiveness, very far removed from gravity, and still further from gloom. Nothing, indeed, could be sweeter than the smile with which she greeted me — nothing more affectionate than her manner.

For a few moments I saw only her. John seemed to vanish from my sight. I told her I was come to claim her as my bride, and that if I were refused, I was resolved to carry her off in spite of all opposition. She answered, with a smile, that happily such extreme measures, which she herself might feel compelled to resist, did not need to be resorted to, for she thought, if a formal claim for her hand were now made to her mother, that it would not be rejected.

“Then there is no longer any impediment,” I exclaimed, joyfully. “You are mine, dearest Apphia — mine for ever!”

“Yes, yours for ever, dearest Mervyn,” she rejoined, with inexpressible tenderness — “yours for ever!”

I drew her towards me as the words were uttered, strained her to my bosom, and sealed our marriage-compact on her lips.

“Heaven bless you both!” John ejaculated, fervently. “My dearest wish on earth is gratified.”

“We must join the party in the garden,” Apphia said, gently extricating herself from my embrace. “Recollect, dear Mervyn, you have my mother’s consent to obtain. You know the promise I gave her?” she added, with a smile.

“A most unfortunate promise I thought it,” I cried.

“You need not mind it now,” she replied. “Come! I long to hear what you think of my new relations — though I am sure you will like them.”

We then went down stairs, and ere we had reached the hall, my father, hearing our voices, came out of the dining-room to meet us. Apphia sprang affectionately towards him.

“Is it as I hope? Am I to call you daughter, my dear child?” he inquired.

She answered gently in the affirmative, and the colonel, enchanted, pressed his lips to her forehead.

We then went forth into the garden. My father offered Apphia his arm, and I did not dispute the privilege with him, but contented myself with walking on her other side.

At an earlier period of my history, I have mentioned that a long, sheltered walk through the garden conducted to the banks of the Ater, where the green slopes, shaded by fine old beech-trees, growing on a dry sandy soil, formed a delightful place of promenade in warm weather. Towards this spot we now shaped our course, as we understood that Lady Amicia was there with her guests.

We found the party seated beneath the trees. The Earl of Rossendale was a venerable-looking man, with snow-white hair, and a truly noble cast of countenance. Years ago he must have had a very stately presence; even now there was an air of infinite dignity about him. Though turned eighty, he bore his years well, and looked as if able to sustain the load for some time longer.

What the old earl had been his son now was — a person of most commanding appearance, lofty in stature, well-built, and with features not merely handsome, but proclaiming his high birth. His carriage was erect, and his deportment ordinarily extremely haughty, though on this occasion I am bound to say that his manner was remarkably affable. In point of age, Lord Leyland was between fifty and sixty, but though he

had led a very active political life, and had filled very important offices both at home and abroad, there was still some of the fire of youth in his glance, and no lack of vigour in his frame. In fact, he might have passed for a younger man by ten years than he was in reality. There was a strong family likeness between Lady Amicia and her relatives, and a remarkable expression of pride, which time had not effaced in the lineaments of the venerable earl, could be distinctly traced in the features of his son and daughter.

Lady Amicia was dressed in deep mourning, and her attire became her exceedingly. Never before had I seen her appear to such great advantage. She was seated between her father and brother, while Dr. Foam occupied a place near the old earl. On seeing us, Lord Leyland immediately arose, and advancing to meet us, shook hands with great cordiality with my father.

"You must make me known to your son, Colonel Clitheroe," he said, with a very encouraging look at me. "I ought to know him, since he is to have my niece. Upon my word, colonel, you have no reason to be ashamed of him — nor have we."

"None of us, I trust, will have reason to blush for him, my dear lord," my father answered, proudly.

"Come with me, young sir," Lord Leyland cried, taking my arm with great good-humour; "I will introduce you to my father myself."

And he led me towards the old earl, who got up at my approach, and offered me his hand. I never beheld anything finer than his manner. A monarch could not have exhibited greater dignity. I almost felt abashed as I took the hand proffered me.

"Here is your grandson — that is to be — my lord," Lord

Leyland cried, "and I think you will approve of him as much as I do."

"I am very glad to see him, and I *do* like his looks," the earl said, glancing kindly at me. "Emulate your father, young man," he added to me, "and we shall all be proud of you."

Having made as suitable a reply as I could, I next addressed myself to Lady Amicia, who received me with a kindness of manner as unexpected as gratifying.

"I will frankly own that I have done you great injustice, Mervyn," she said. "I have suffered myself to be prejudiced against you, and have believed assertions which I ought to have treated as calumnies. But I will make every reparation in my power. I know what you would ask of me, and will anticipate the request. My daughter's hand shall be yours — her heart has been yours long ago. I will say more — I feel certain that she could not find a worthier husband."

My feelings so completely overpowered me that I was unable to make an adequate reply. I attempted to speak; but my emotion was too great, and checked my utterance.

"I will thank you for Mervyn, dear mother," John said, stepping forward. "And let me add, that you have doubled the favour by the manner of conferring it. Never have I loved and honoured you more than at this moment."

"Well, then, this important matter is settled," Lord Leyland cried, coming to my rescue. "We are all agreed that the marriage is to take place, and the only thing remaining to be done is to fix the day."

"The sooner the better," I cried.

"Suppose we say this day month?" Lord Leyland said. "Will that do, Apphia?"

"Nay, don't appeal to me, uncle," she replied. "However, I shall raise no objection."

"And I am sure Mervyn will not," my father interposed. "With Lady Amicia's permission, the wedding shall take place on this day month."

Her ladyship graciously signified her assent, and my happiness was complete.

"Can we not manage to find John a wife at the same time," Lord Leyland cried. "I think I *have* heard of a certain young lady — possessed of great personal attractions — amiable as beautiful — and an heiress, if I am not misinformed — who might, perhaps, be prevailed upon to give her hand, if properly solicited."

"The experiment may be made at once," I said, "for here she comes."

"While Lord Leyland had been speaking, I had descried Comberbach advancing with a party consisting of Old Hazy and his sister, Ora and Cuthbert Spring.

The new-comers, it appeared, had been invited to meet my father and myself, and experienced a most friendly reception from Lady Amicia — so friendly that Old Hazy was quite overwhelmed by it. Could this affable lady be the domineering, disagreeable personage he had heard of? Impossible! Miss Hazilrigge was equally surprised, but greatly pleased, as was Ora, to whom Lady Amicia paid the most marked attention.

Apphia, of course, was delighted to see her friends, and the party from the Grange at once found themselves at home. Indeed, with the exception of Lady Amicia's two noble relatives, they were among old friends, for Dr. Foam was well known to Mr. Hazilrigge, and had often experienced his hospitality at Owlarton Grange.

But even from the "great folks," as Miss Hazilrigge termed them in private to me, they met the same friendly welcome. The old Earl of Rossendale quite unbent, and, as is always the case when a proud man *does* unbend, was infinitely more agreeable than a person of habitually easy manners. He seemed quite to appreciate Old Hazy, who, with all his peculiarities, was a perfect gentleman of the old school, and this Lord Rossendale did not fail to discover. So the venerable and courtly peer and the worthy old commoner got on remarkably well together. Old Hazy and the ladies were invited to the earl's seat, Buckrose, in Yorkshire; and in his turn Lord Rossendale promised to pay his new friend a visit at Owlarton Grange. The invitations were not matters of form, but were heartily given on both sides, and what is more, both visits were paid.

Courteous and pleasant to all, Lord Leyland devoted himself chiefly to the ladies. I saw in moment that he was greatly struck by Ora, as indeed he could not fail to be, for she was looking her very best, was exquisitely attired, and in high spirits. I also quickly perceived that he was determined to set matters right between his nephew and the young heiress.

"Why the girl is a perfect angel," I heard him exclaim to John; "I never beheld a more charming creature — magnificent eyes — and the figure and step of an Andalusian! What could any man wish for more? You must'nt let such a prize slip through your fingers."

"I am afraid he will, unless your lordship comes to his assistance," I observed, *sotto voce*.

The hint was not lost upon Lord Leyland. He at once set to work, and very soon contrived to settle the little lovers' quarrel. By gently fanning the rising flame, he soon caused

it to burn as strongly as ever. When this reconciliation was effected, and John was safely caught in the toils of his fair enslaver, Lord Leyland announced that he had obtained a promise that the dormant title would be restored, and his nephew might therefore be considered, to all intents and purposes, Lord Wilburton.

A fair opportunity was here afforded Lady Amicia for a display of generosity, and I am happy to say she did not allow it to pass. She at once declared that her son should have half her property — even more, if he needed it — to support his title.

And what answer did John make? Did he coldly and philosophically put aside his good fortune? Could he disoblige his noble relatives, and disappoint his mother? Could he resist all our friendly importunities? Above all, could he withstand the bewitching glances of her he loved? He yielded and with a good grace. In fact, his noble kinsmen, and the language they held, had awakened a proper pride in his bosom, and he began to perceive that he might do more good in the exalted position that awaited him than in the lowly station which he had previously chosen. Heretofore his mother had made him shrink with alarm from the chance of contact with the great world. But recent experiences led him to believe that he should benefit by mixing with it. And he was right. As Lord Wilburton — for he soon afterwards obtained the title — his character was strengthened and refined, his delightful social qualities were brought into play, and his power of doing good increased twenty-fold.

“While general conversation was going on, Cuthbert Spring drew me aside.

“A word with you, my young friend,” he said. “I suppose you understand it all now?”

"I understand that I am completely happy," I replied; "but how these extraordinary changes have been brought about passes my comprehension. My father has kept me quite in the dark."

"Your father is fond of surprises, as you must have seen," Cuthbert rejoined. "He won't unmask his batteries till all is ready for action. During the whole of the month that you were enjoined to keep quiet — for he was afraid of your meddling with his plans —"

"Not having any great opinion of my capacity, I suppose —"

"He and I were hard at work for you," Cuthbert proceeded. "It was rather a difficult job," he added, lowering his voice, "to accommodate matters with Lady Amicia, but with Dr. Foam's help, who has been of immense use to us, we accomplished it at last. You never suspected that your father was a daily visitor here, eh?"

"Never," I replied. "I didn't dream of such a thing. Apphia never mentioned him in her letters to her brother."

"Not in those he showed you, I dare say. But John has been let into the plot for the last three weeks. But I haven't told you all. As soon as matters were adjusted in this quarter, and her ladyship's consent to the marriage was *all but* obtained — we all three — that is, your father, Dr. Foam, and myself — went over to Buckrose, where we were extremely well received by the old earl and his son. Full explanations were given by the colonel of his intentions in regard to you, which are very handsome I need scarcely say, and the treaty of alliance was speedily concluded so far as Lord Rossendale was concerned. His lordship was pleased to say, that as he took it for granted you must resemble your father, he should unhesitatingly give his sanction to your union with his grand-

daughter. Before this, I ought to tell you, a complete reconciliation had taken place between Lady Amicia and her noble relatives, but they had not met. This matrimonial arrangement induced Lord Rossendale to expedite the visit he intended to pay his daughter, and Lord Leyland accompanied him, as you see. Your crowning piece of good-luck, however, was the recovery of the will, which came in the very nick of time, and at once turned the scale in your favour with Lady Amicia. We gave ourselves no trouble about Simon Pownall, for we felt certain he would go back to the Grange and get entrapped there. Now you know all. Ah! colonel," he added, as my father and Dr. Foam came towards us, "I have been telling Mervyn of your plot."

"I have plotted for his happiness," my father replied, "and I hope have succeeded. Mervyn, you are greatly indebted to these two kind friends—but especially to Dr. Foam, without whose assistance you would not be here at this moment. He smoothed the way for us."

"Tut! tut! say no more about it, colonel," the worthy physician cried. "All's well that ends well! Things went very cross with Mervyn for a long time, but they have got straight at last. I think he will now admit that I did well in counselling Apphia to remain with her mother."

I took both his hands, shook them, and thanked him from the bottom of my heart.

After passing some time pleasantly under the trees, we were summoned to a collation by Mr. Comberbach, and adjourned to the house. It was an excellent repast, and greatly enjoyed, but I shall not pause to describe it, contenting myself with mentioning three toasts given on the occasion. The first of these proceeded from the Earl of Rossendale, and had

reference to the marriage which had that day been fixed between myself and his granddaughter. This toast was remarkably well received. Lord Leyland then called upon us to drink health and happiness to another couple, whom he was delighted to say were to be shortly united — his nephew, whom he would venture to style Lord Wilburton, and Miss Ora Doveton. The cheers which followed this toast had scarcely subsided, when Dr. Foam proposed a third couple — his old and esteemed friend Cuthbert Spring and Miss Hazilrigge. The last toast was drunk amidst great cheering and laughter.

On that day month the three marriages were solemnised at the Collegiate Church.

A word ere bidding the friendly reader farewell.

I am now living at the Anchorite's, which Lady Amicia has resigned to us. My father, I am happy to say, is our constant guest. It is almost needless to say that Mr. and Mrs. Comberbach retain their situations. But with me Mrs. Comberbach will always be Molly Bailey.

Lord and Lady Wilburton reside in Yorkshire, at no great distance from the Earl of Rossendale's seat, Buckrose. Lady Amicia has taken up her abode in the same county, but passes the greatest part of her time with her father, with whom she has become an extraordinary favourite.

Old Hazy with Cuthbert Spring and his wife are joint occupants of Owlarton Grange, and the hospitality of the house is by no means diminished. My wife and myself are

ever-welcome visitors, and have always the haunted room assigned to us. When business brings Cuthbert Spring to Cottonborough, as is not unfrequently the case, he takes up his abode at the Anchorite's.

I am often at Nethercrofts to look after my property, and derive great assistance in its management from trusty Ned Culcheth, whom I have appointed my bailiff. I have given Ned a comfortable farm-house, where he is as happy as a prince — a great deal happier, indeed, than many princes — for when he returns home at eventide, after a day's work, he has not only a fond wife to welcome him, but three blooming children to climb round his knees "the envied kiss to share."

THE END.

and have always the painted room
 assigned to us. When painted brings Gilbert Spring to
 the conclusion, and is not interrupted by the case, he takes up
 his abode at the Anabaptist's and is not long in making
 it his office at Northampton to look after my property, and
 give great assistance in its management from first to last.
 I thought, when I was appointed my little, I have given
 him a comfortable turn-house, where he is as happy as a
 prince — a great deal happier, indeed, than many princes —
 for when he returns home at evening, after a day's work, he
 has not only a fond wife to welcome him, but three blooming
 children to climb round his neck, "the envious kiss to share."

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